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Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1605)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): I'm told we have a quorum. So we can begin.

Good afternoon, everyone.

I call this meeting to order.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Members are attending in person or using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

Given the ongoing pandemic situation, and in 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 members in advance for their cooperation. A reminder to everyone, when speaking, please 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 know that we may need to suspend for a few minutes, as we need 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 Monday, January 31, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on francophone immigration to Canada and Quebec.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

We are pleased to have, in particular, Mr. Théberge, Commissioner of Official Languages.

Mr. Théberge, it's always a pleasure to have you with us.

Mr. Théberge is accompanied by Isabelle Gervais, Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Assurance Branch, and Pierre Leduc, Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications Branch.

Good afternoon, everyone. It's a pleasure to see you once again in our committee.

As you know, Commissioner, you have five minutes for your opening remarks. Then we will go to a period of questions. I will let you know when you have one minute left.

Commissioner, you have the floor.

Mr. Raymond Théberge (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members of the Committee, good afternoon.

[*English*]

Although today's meeting is taking place virtually, I would like to acknowledge that I am speaking to you from Treaty No. 1 territory, the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples and the homeland of the Métis nation.

[*Translation*]

Immigration has a direct influence on the demolingistic balance between English and French in Canada outside of Quebec. It's good to see that your Committee is looking into this key issue. Today, I'd like to talk to you about our recent study on the 4.4% immigration target for French-speaking immigrants in Francophone minority communities.

The study primarily consists of a statistical analysis.

The Chair: Pardon me for interrupting, Commissioner.

I'm told you could perhaps lower your microphone slightly.

Mr. Raymond Théberge: All right.

And I must stress here that it focuses solely on immigration as a factor influencing the demographic weight of Francophone minority communities. It does not include other important factors—like low birth rates, an aging population and interprovincial mobility, for example—which can also have various degrees of impact in different regions.

[English]

Our statistical analysis also deals with only one part of the immigration continuum: the selection and admission of French-speaking permanent residents. It does not address their integration into francophone minority communities or their retention within those communities.

Studies show that even if the 4.4% francophone immigration target had been consistently met each year since the original 2008 deadline, it would not have been enough to maintain the demographic weight of the French-speaking population outside Quebec, which was the goal, much less contribute to its growth, which was the ideal. According to the 2001 census, this population represented 4.4% of the Canadian population outside Quebec. If the target had been met, it could have helped reduce the decline we saw in the 2016 census, when the demographic weight dropped to 3.8%.

Today, almost 20 years after it was set, the target is still not being met. Between 2008, which was the original target deadline, and 2020, the shortfall in admissions of French-speaking permanent residents to francophone minority communities is upwards of 75,000.

[Translation]

Our study, like many others, noted that Francophone minority communities have been experiencing immigration deficits for decades. We're already seeing the demographic impact.

There are also current and long-term repercussions on the economic, cultural and social aspects of community vitality. We've seen the impact of an aging population in many Francophone minority communities, where seniors are often older and more vulnerable than seniors in English-speaking majority communities. This is a worrisome effect of immigration deficits within Francophone minority communities.

Extending over more than 20 years—which is an entire generation—this trend of increasing deficits needs to be reversed right now in order to ensure the future of Canada's Francophone communities outside Quebec.

Francophone minority communities across the country are keen to attract, welcome and support all newcomers.

[English]

It's time to do more and do better. In our study, I recommend that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada conduct a full analysis of the current target and its impact in order to help define a new, higher one.

I also call on the federal government to adopt a policy on immigration to francophone minority communities. I'm very pleased that the new version of the long-awaited bill to modernize the Official Languages Act has been tabled and is now a reality. Bill C-13 recognizes immigration as one of the factors that contribute to maintaining or increasing the demographic weight of French linguistic minority communities.

It also requires the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to adopt a policy on francophone immigration, including objectives,

targets and indicators to enhance the vitality of French linguistic minority communities in Canada.

[Translation]

Given the importance of immigration for Francophone minority communities, I will be studying the new obligations in Bill C-13 to make sure that they provide the best possible results for the communities.

Francophone immigration is still very much in the news. It's reassuring to see numerous initiatives being organized across the country to support immigration to Francophone minority communities, and I sincerely hope that all of these efforts will yield results for these communities in their determination to grow and thrive.

Thank you for your attention.

I will be happy to answer your questions in the official language of your choice.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Commissioner.

I would remind you that your microphone is still extremely sensitive. Could you lower it a bit more?

Mr. Raymond Thériage: Is it better like that?

The Chair: Yes, that may be better.

The first questions will be asked by 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

Thank you for being with us today, Mr. Thériage. It's always a pleasure to welcome you to the committee.

You discussed a number of factors that may influence the presence of francophones in minority communities and said that immigration was one of the solutions.

Would you please tell us where immigration ranks among the solutions that should be applied to address the deficit of francophones outside Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Thériage: I think immigration is the most effective solution for maintaining the demographic weight of francophone communities outside Quebec relative to that of the anglophone majority. In the Canadian context, immigration is the most important factor in ensuring demographic growth across the country. That's obviously true for francophones as well.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Commissioner.

You said that Bill C-13, which was introduced on March 1st of this year, acknowledged the importance of immigration. You also noted that it contained a provision requiring the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, to adopt a policy including indicators.

It's good to see such a provision in the bill. However, apart from the obligation to establish a francophone immigration policy including objectives, targets and indicators, no mention is made of an obligation of result.

What's your opinion on that point?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It would be good to see that clarified in the regulations made under Bill C-13. It's also important to acknowledge that the situation is now urgent and we must take action to address the demographic decline of our communities. We have to establish somewhat stronger measures. In fact, I think we should have a francophone immigration policy focusing specifically on the development of our francophone minority communities.

We definitely need to expand the bill's current provisions and ensure accountability, probably on an annual basis.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Thank you.

Do you think that the bill the Minister of Official Languages introduced has teeth?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Considering the powers it would grant the Commissioner, I'd say the bill is much more robust than the present version of the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: You say it's more robust, but could it be more so?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It might be useful, for example, to extend administrative monetary penalties to other sectors besides transportation. It's also a question whether the various powers could be applied to part VII of the act as well. We're examining all these aspects, and we'll be back with much clearer positions during the debates and proceedings on the bill.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Thank you, Commissioner.

Bill C-13 would give you more powers, but what about francophone immigration?

You now have additional authority to compel transportation sector organizations that provide services to travellers to comply with the act.

Allow me to cite a very specific case as an example. Regina's airport, which is required to comply with the Official Languages Act, asserts that every necessary effort has been made to find bilingual or francophone employees in order to comply with the act.

What will happen if there's no francophone immigration pool? How will you react?

What will you do as Commissioner if that airport accepts flights and proves that it has done everything it's required to do to comply with the act but is simply unable to attract francophones?

• (1615)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That's a hypothetical situation and a hard one for me to speculate on.

What's important is that we ensure our francophone minority communities can take in enough immigrants to secure the demographic weight of those communities.

As I said in my presentation, the demographic decline has an impact on the economy, culture and services. Strong immigration is essential to guaranteeing the future of our communities.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Thank you.

Commissioner, let's say you have a magic wand and you want to reverse the decline of French in Canada.

What do you do?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We have to design an immigration policy tailored to our communities. That means establishing much more ambitious targets than in the past and acquiring the means and resources to reach those targets.

Perhaps we should think...

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Pardon me for interrupting, Commissioner, but I'd like to know what you mean by a more ambitious target than 4.4%.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It could be a 7%, 8% or 9% target. However, before setting it, we would need evidence, such as the existing gaps...

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

A word to committee members, before we continue, I would like to inform you that the bell will ring around 6:34 p.m. Do we have unanimous consent to continue the meeting until there are five minutes left. I believe everyone here votes using the Zoom application and that no one is voting in person in Parliament.

Do I have unanimous consent to continue the meeting while the bell rings?

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Yes, Mr. Chair, but perhaps we should decide how long before the start of the voting you want the meeting to stop.

The Chair: I suggest we continue the meeting until five minutes before the vote.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: That's fine with me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I see that everyone agrees; that's good. Then we will continue.

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

[English]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-L  onard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you for being here, Mr. Commissioner. It's always a pleasure to see you amongst us.

With regard to your study on the francophone immigration target outside of Quebec that has yet to be reached for the 2023 deadline, which you released in November 2021, what are the ongoing challenges you see accounting for our not being able to meet the target?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: There are a number of challenges that we've identified in the study, which focused on francophone permanent residents.

There are a number of immigration pathways, and I think we have issues in a number of them. For example, with the economic immigration class, we should be focusing on a francophone immigrant class. We have a significant number of refugees who come to Canada and establish themselves in francophone communities. It is a very important source of immigration, so when we think of refugee policy, we also have to think about how we meet our official languages commitments with respect to the communities.

We have issues with international students and study permits in how they can transition from temporary to permanent residence.

We also have issues in recruitment and where we look for and try to find immigrants. We know where there are significant pools of French speakers, whether they are in sub-Saharan Africa or northern Africa. We have to look at those particular regions and try to focus on a strategy that allows us to go where the francophones are.

There are other issues with francophone immigration, like language testing.

In the past, we have not put together the kind of global plan to specifically attack francophone immigration. It's always been, in my view, an add-on to other programs, so we have to be more specific and more targeted in how we do things.

• (1620)

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I understand.

I think your input on what you would like to see in the francophone immigration strategy policy could be useful to us. Perhaps your report may point us in that direction. If there are any other measures or ideas you have, please submit them to us in this committee. We would most likely study them and forward them to the immigration minister.

I know there was an idea at this committee, where a member had suggested that immigrants not come to us but that we in Canada go to them, such that we would have people from the government go to different countries to alleviate the very expensive costs that sometimes people have to incur to be able to make a request to come here to Canada so that this work would be done on foreign territory.

I want to know your opinion on that.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We have in place certain recruitment strategies that, whether it's—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Pardon me for interrupting, Commissioner. The interpreters are asking that you move your mic away from your mouth.

Ms. Lattanzio, I'm pausing your time.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Chair, are you speaking to me or to the Commissioner?

The Chair: I'm speaking to the Commissioner.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: All right.

The Chair: Commissioner, your mic is still too close to your mouth...

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Is this better now?

The Chair: Please continue speaking. I'll interrupt you if necessary.

[*English*]

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Is this better?

I'll try to answer the question.

We have in place a certain way of doing business, and I think we've been doing it the same way for a long—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: That's perfect.

I'll restart the clock. Three minutes and thirty-eight seconds have elapsed so far.

[*English*]

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Circling back to the question, we have in place a number of strategies that have been used for many years. Maybe one of the ways to consider is how we recruit on the ground. I'm not an expert in how we recruit immigrants, but it's important that we reach out in those regions where there are important numbers of French speakers who have an interest in moving to Canada.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: What role do provinces play in attaining the targets?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Immigration is a shared jurisdiction. The kind of relationship the provinces have with the federal government varies greatly from province to province, as you know—

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Yes, in some parts.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: —Quebec and the federal government have their own agreements.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Right.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: So I think it's important that when there are discussions between various jurisdictions, we take into consideration the francophone minorities. In other words, when we talk about nomination programs or the numbers in nomination programs, we should be thinking about what the needs of the francophone communities are. Since it's a shared jurisdiction, it's important that both parties play an active role in promoting francophone immigration in their province or territory.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay, and with regard to obligations, my colleague mentions the obligation of result. I would like to bring you along the obligation of means.

[*Translation*]

Do you think we should subject the policy or the questions that are submitted to you to attract francophone immigration to an obligation of means rather than an obligation of result?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think we should acquire the means to achieve our ambitions.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you.

I have no more questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lattanzio.

We now go to the next round of questions. I give the floor to the second vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'  le, BQ): Good afternoon, Commissioner.

Thank you for being with us today.

The assimilation or language transfer rate of allophones outside Quebec is nearly 100%. It's 99%.

Some people, such as Charles Castonguay, claim that the rate of language transfer toward English for both foreign immigrants and Quebecers who settle in other provinces is very high. Successfully attracting francophone immigrants is somewhat like trying to fill a bucket with a hole in the bottom.

What do you think?

• (1625)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We won't change demographic outcomes if we don't do something different or use different means.

When we say francophone immigration, we don't just mean recruitment; we also integration and retention.

Integration means we have to ensure that people have access to jobs, housing and education in the minority language.

If we fail to establish those kinds of programs and tools enabling us to take in and integrate francophone immigrants, they may join the majority or even move to other regions of the country. That has often occurred.

To ensure we retain francophone immigrants, we must be able to provide strong support so they don't leave one region for another. For example, someone might leave New Brunswick to settle in Quebec or vice versa. That's what will happen if we do nothing.

I think we can establish robust programs that will produce results.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Many studies show that newcomers must settle in regions where there's a francophone mass in order to integrate. Then they'll tend to integrate in French.

In the present circumstances, would it be preferable to target regions such as the Acadian peninsula or regions where there's a francophone mass? That would help integrate and retain immigrants.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I've observed the diversity of francophone communities outside Quebec and across the country for some years now.

In Manitoba, for example, they now call it the Soci  t   de la francophonie manitobaine instead of the Soci  t   franco-manitobaine.

We can see diversity in...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You're not answering my question.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: What I'm telling you is that every community can take in immigrants.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In Quebec, the Canada-Quebec Accord, which allowed Quebec to select the immigrant worker class, for example, made it possible to select more francophone immigrants or immigrants from francotropic countries. That's why language transfers to French have increased to a certain degree. There had already been language transfers toward French. That continues in Quebec.

The percentage of francotropic immigrants has risen sharply since 2015 because people who have a temporary study permit or a temporary work permit come from migrant backgrounds.

Do you think it's also important to promote and increase francophone immigration to Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The Quebec and federal governments negotiated an accord, and I believe Quebec's in a better position to determine its demographic needs. As far as I know, we take its opinion into account when setting the national immigration target.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We recently saw in the media that the refusal rate for study permit applications is approximately 80%, sometimes more, for students from certain countries that constitute francophone immigration pools. By that I mean certain African countries, particularly in North Africa, such as Algeria.

To file an application in Quebec, students must have confirmed their admission to a university-level francophone educational institution and have received a Quebec acceptance certificate. However, their study permit applications are subsequently denied. Quebec has no direct influence on this factor.

How do you explain these high rates of refusal of study permit applications submitted by students from francophone African countries?

How do you explain why the refusal rate is much higher for students who want to settle in Quebec or to study at a francophone university elsewhere in Canada?

The situation's really a problem.

What you think?

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu. You may get an answer in the next round of questions.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Greetings to the Commissioner, who is back before our committee.

Once again, my first question concerns Africa.

Mr. Théberge, as you mentioned earlier and discussed in your report, you want to target certain recruitment pools, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where 68% of the world's French-language speakers live.

However, Carol Jolin told this committee during a previous study that it wasn't unusual for an applicant from sub-Saharan Africa to have to cross six countries to file an application. Moïse Zahoui also told us that there was a glaring lack of visa offices.

In light of that testimony, is the government doing enough to recruit francophone immigrants?

Should we change our approach to Africa?

Could increasing the number of visa offices be part of the solution?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: We have to do things differently if we want different results. I remember a time when the entire student visa review process was conducted in Dakar. Everyone had to travel to Dakar, which made matters difficult for a great many students.

If we want to target sub-Saharan Africa, which, once again, represents a potentially large pool, we have to acquire the necessary tools.

You mentioned the possibility of increasing the number of visa offices. I'm not an immigration expert, but I can tell you that, when you want to serve a clientele, it may be a good idea to move closer to it. That may be one way to view the matter.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for that answer.

According to the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, or FCFA, we would need an 8% target, which you described as ambitious, to maintain the present demographic weight of francophones outside Quebec from now until 2036.

At the same time, immigrants from Africa encounter obstacles in the immigration process. You said Canada should establish a francophone immigration policy.

Should we adopt a differentiated approach to meet our targets, for example, by accepting more students, particularly from Africa?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: We've introduced the concept of substantive equality. The way to implement that concept is to establish differentiated programs to ensure that one community is able to join another at the same level. You need to use a differentiated approach to promote francophone immigration.

How will that be implemented? That's another story. However, there can be no doubt that what's being done now isn't working. Yes, it's ambitious to set a target of 8% because we've never even met the 4.4% target.

I think it's important to design different approaches to ensure we commit to substantive equality in immigration.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'm going to address a topic that's related to what you just said and to other conversations we've had in the com-

mittee. We all know there's a labour shortage, particularly in education and early childhood.

To guarantee the adequate offer of service to francophones and francophiles, do you think it would be desirable for IRCC to give favourable treatment to skilled workers, which would help us provide more French-language services in the rest of Canada?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: Once again, what's important is that everyone sees there's a shortage of bilingual labour across the country. There's a glaring shortage of early childhood, education and health care workers.

Certain employment classes have been preferred in other fields. I think that's what should be done, if it meets a need.

• (1635)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Have you heard any comments from francophone immigrants about language tests?

We've seen in the committee that the difficulty of those tests is causing problems even for francophones who've spoken and worked in French all their lives. We've heard some quite troubling testimony on the subject.

Why do applicants fail? Given the testimony we've all heard, do you think the tests are too difficult or even poorly designed?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: We've heard several comments on the cost of the test, access to the test and the quality of the test.

We have to wonder whether the tests meet the needs of those who have to take them. I think that's a question we have to consider.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'd like to thank you, Mr. Théberge. We're grateful for the importance you attach to francophone communities across Canada, such as those in Manitoba, which are perhaps not among the federal government's top priorities, but which deserve much more attention and support.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Colleagues, before we begin the second round, I want to inform you that the entire technical team, including the interpreters, is prepared to do full two-hour blocks, despite the vote.

Does that suit the entire team? We have to devote an hour to our business, and it's important.

Do we have unanimous consent for a complete two-hour block?

Mr. Joël Godin: In fact...

The Chair: You have the floor, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, unfortunately, I have to leave at 5:55 p.m. because I have another engagement at 6 p.m. I want to contribute, but I don't want to stay after 5:55 p.m.

The Chair: Are there any others who have to leave the meeting before 5:55 p.m.?

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): It's the same for me, Mr. Chair, I have the same engagement as Mr. Godin, at 6 p.m.

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): I have to leave at 5:30 p.m. or 5:45 p.m. to give a speech in the House.

The Chair: Okay.

In that case, I suggest that we do a round of questions, thank the Commissioner and his team afterwards, and then move on to committee work.

Would that be all right with you?

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I agree completely with your suggestion, but I can't speak on behalf of my other colleagues.

The Chair: I see that everyone is in agreement.

Commissioner, I'm sorry about this interruption. Those are the ups and downs of parliamentary life. We need to consider the fact that votes are being held.

We're beginning the second round of questions. Our new recruit, Mr. Richard Lehoux, will be the first to question the Commissioner and his team.

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

Mr. Richard Lehoux (Beauce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner, for being here with us this afternoon.

When one of my colleagues asked you about the immigration target, you talked about increasing it to 7%, 8% or 9%.

How did you come up with that number?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: We based our calculations on the gap between the 4.4% target and the objective of 200,000 francophone immigrants.

Also factored in was Canada's intention to raise its overall immigration target, which would increase from 350,000 to 410,000 and then to 450,000. That would make it even more difficult to achieve our francophone immigration target. I believe that an 8% target is a minimum.

Other witnesses will probably have much more statistically detailed analyses to answer the question. However, we will be facing a challenge when the number of immigrants increases substantially, because we would then have to figure out how to reach the target.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you.

So am I right in saying that the figure could still increase considerably?

I'd like to ask you a question about the refusal rate for immigration applicants from francophone countries, including several African countries. This point was raised earlier.

How do you explain the fact that the department rejects so many applications. A refusal rate of 80% was mentioned earlier.

• (1640)

Mr. Raymond Théberge: That's hard to explain. It had something to do with software, but I don't really understand the logic that led to the refusal of these applications. We are waiting for answers, like everyone else. When I worked internationally, there were similar challenges.

I can't really answer that. We are waiting for answers from the department.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you, Commissioner.

Does the Department provide you with data on the rejection rates and the reasons for them?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: We haven't yet explored this matter with IRCC.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Commissioner, 80% refusal rates are certainly not going to help francophone immigration.

Would it be appropriate to look into the matter more closely?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: The question certainly merits an analysis. As we work through the next phases pertaining to the target, the strategies and the programs to be implemented, we will clearly have to address it.

Hosting international students would nevertheless be a good way of increasing francophone immigration, whether to Quebec, Moncton or elsewhere, regardless of the federal institutions.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Is it part of your mandate to obtain answers like these as quickly as possible?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: No, not at the moment.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: There are also many applications for rural areas more or less everywhere in Canada.

Do you have any figures that could shed light on this matter for us?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: I don't have the numbers for rural communities. However, we established the Welcoming Francophone Communities initiative. These communities are often in rural regions. The program supports the integration of francophone immigrants in these communities.

In some provinces, rurality is part of everyday life, and the demographic decline of francophones is even more marked in these regions. There is very often an even more serious shortage of labour. It's therefore important to find ways to deal with these situations and I think that at the moment...

Mr. Richard Lehoux: I apologize for interrupting you, but I'm running out of speaking time.

Could we have the figures...

The Chair: You're speaking time is up, Mr. Lehoux.

That's it, Mr. Lehoux.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Mr. Chair, I just want to know if we can have the numbers...

Sometimes there's a delay because of the interpretation.

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

My colleagues simply wanted to ask the commissioner to send us the figures in writing.

The Chair: I understood that, but as you know, at the end of every meeting, I ask witnesses to do exactly that. The commissioner could send us the information in writing, like all the other witnesses.

Mr. Marc Serré, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Commissioner of Official Languages, will be asking the next questions.

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Théberge, for being here with us once again. I believe this is the second time you've come in few weeks. It's always a pleasure to hear your recommendations.

Earlier, you were saying that Bill C-13 had more teeth and that there were provisions covering immigration.

Do you believe that it's important for the committee to study Bill C-13 as soon as possible, within the next few days, or do you think we can still wait for a few months?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: I believe we need to get going as quickly as possible on a study of Bill C-13.

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

• (1645)

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Godin?

Mr. Joël Godin: The Commissioner of Official Languages is appearing here today in connection with the study on francophone immigration.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Théberge. You answered the question. It's an important point, given that immigration is included in Bill C-13. Thank you very much for making sure that it will be possible to start the study as quickly as possible.

I'd like to return briefly to your recommendations on immigration, including the role of the provinces. You spoke earlier about the shared provincial and federal responsibilities. Ontario, for example has a program under which over 8,000 applicants are designated each year.

Do you have any specific recommendations to make? Are you working closely with the provinces?

As for the federal role, what recommendations do you think we should make to ensure that the provinces also contribute to increasing francophone immigration?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: We don't work with the provinces on immigration. That's an area of shared jurisdiction. That being the case, it's important that when figures are established for various categories, the provinces should be aware of their communities' needs.

It's also important for the federal government to ask the right questions about the needs of these communities.

I feel that it's part of a proactive and differentiated approach that gives due regard to positive measures and allows us to work towards genuine equality. Of course, we are in a federated country. We know the areas of jurisdiction, but it's still important for the various levels of government to work together.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

Similarly, with respect to the positive measures and a proactive approach, Ms. Ashton asked earlier about the shortage of teachers. Some representatives from national associations told us that this was really important.

Have you worked with the provincial associations on education and early childhood? Do you have recommendations to make about how to address the shortage of francophone teachers?

Mr. Raymond Théberge: In a 2019 study, we took stock of the shortage of French as a second language teachers, and teachers whose mother tongue is French. This area does in fact affect the education continuum. We naturally discussed this shortage with people from several associations. At the time, we asked for coordination—which in passing did occur—to ensure that funds would be spent in various areas, including faculties of education.

It might also be worthwhile to find a way to recruit teachers and education staff from other countries and to help them adapt to Canada's cultural context. That's extremely important. As a former dean of a faculty of education, I can tell you that there is a pedagogical culture in our classrooms in Canada. Newcomers therefore need to be allowed to adapt to this culture. It's important to find as many ways as possible, because there is a glaring shortage of French-speaking education staff across the country.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you very much.

As I only have 15 seconds left, I'd like to ask you to send the study committee any analyses or recommendations you may have been able to come up with on host organizations across Canada, which are funded by IRCC. I'd also like to know whether you have any recommendations to make about the amounts to be allocated to francophone organizations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Serré.

I need to keep close track of the time, because we have to move on to committee work.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Commissioner,^x Mr. Handfield, who appeared before the committee, had a lot of trouble dealing with IRCC in Montreal. He had been told not to use French, even though it was a request from his client. He also underscored the fact that many of his clients tried to deal with immigration staff in French, but received answers in English.

Can you investigate that?

Previously, very little work was done on behalf of French in Quebec. That was because of the status of the two minorities.

Would Bill C-13 enable you to more readily investigate this situation in Quebec?

• (1650)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The commissioner has the power to investigate and to initiate his own investigations.

We discussed this situation at considerable length. The staff at immigration offices in Montreal is heavily anglophone, and that's of great concern to me.

In my view, it's up to IRCC to look into the matter and find ways to deal with it as quickly as possible. It's unacceptable for people not to be able receive assistance in the official language of their choice, particularly in a region that is designated bilingual.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Handfield^x told us that the situation was not improving, but getting worse. IRCC does not appear to be able to investigate its own operations. We repeatedly questioned representatives of the department, but they didn't have any answers. We didn't know why the department was unable to meet its francophone immigration targets for more than 20 years. This is not very promising.

Would you be able to examine internal operations at IRCC to find the cause of the problem?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: You mentioned IRCC, but are you talking about one particular area?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'm talking about IRCC, but also about the immigration offices in Montreal. I'm talking about the fact that officers approve temporary resident permits while largely refusing study permit applications from people in African countries.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, it's over to you now for two and half minutes.

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

My question for the commissioner is once again on the issue of francization services.

Do you think that the federal government is doing enough for francization?

Here at the committee, we've heard that online courses were available, but only in one official language. Immigrants who settle outside Quebec almost always choose English.

Should courses be available in both languages, at least in regions where there is a high proportion of francophones?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Canada has two official languages. At the Canadian citizenship ceremony, the country's linguistic duality and its two official languages are acknowledged.

If we want to receive immigrants in the official language of their choice and give them a real choice, it's important, and even essential, to give them access to language training in the language of their choice.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Bill C-13 recommends that the government should set a francophone immigration target, but gives no further details.

Do you think there ought to be some guidelines for these targets?

Should we aim at returning the demographic weight of francophones in Canada to its 2001 level, the year when targets began to be introduced?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Not only should we be aiming at a 4.4% target for francophone immigration, but increase it if we want to be more ambitious. That would mean aiming at expanding rather than just maintaining a level. It's clear that the 4.4% target is a minimum, not a maximum. In an immigration action plan, it's important to set an ambitious target.

And if we want to reach this target, we have to acknowledge that we need to come up with the tools and resources required. The past is not necessarily a good yardstick, particularly if it shows that we haven't met the target.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you once again for your testimony, Mr. Th  berge.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Given the time, the next questions will be asked by Mr. Gourde and Mr. Iacono, each of whom will have three and a half minutes.

Mr. Gourde, you have the floor for three and a half minutes.

• (1655)

Mr. Bernard G  n  reux: Mr. Gourde is absent. If it's all right with you, Mr. Chair, I'll take his place.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. G  n  reux.

Mr. Bernard G  n  reux: I am delighted to see you, Commissioner. It's very good of you to be here with us today.

How would you define a community with a strong francophone presence in Canada? How many people would that be?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I look at the situation in terms of the ethnolinguistic vitality concept.

What makes a community? A community is a set of individuals, institutions and shared cultural values.

Across Canada, communities have provided themselves with institutions and live in French, want services in French and want to continue to flourish in French.

For me, a francophone community is a community that self-identifies as francophone and provides itself with the means required to live in French in that community. My definition is not based on numbers. A community's vitality needs to be measured in terms of its institutional networks, culture, education services, and so on.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: In view of what you've just said, do you intend to send the government a list of places that you yourself consider to be francophone communities in Canada?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: We've never been asked to provide anything like that, and it has never been our intention to supply that kind of information.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: On Monday, the IRCC Minister appeared before the committee and told us that Canada was about to reach the 3% target set for francophone immigration in 2022, out of the 4.4% overall target that the country has been attempting to achieve for almost 30 years. According to him, the 4.4% target would likely be reached in 2023.

Do you think that what he said is realistic?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: It's a difficult target to meet, and even if we managed to do it once in 20 years, I wouldn't think that we could say we had truly achieved it. There's ambiguity with respect to the target in the sense that it's not clear whether it's an annual target or a target to be reached over a 20-year period?

I see it more as an annual target, and even if we are successful, one way or another, in reaching the 4.4% target, I don't think we can truly say that we have met the target that was set in 2001.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'm pleased to hear you say that, because it's increasingly a matter of raising the target, because Canada wants to welcome many more immigrants than it ever has.

What do you think about increasing the target to 8% or 10%, in the hope of reaching 5%, given that we've never managed more than 2% for francophone immigration?

If we set a target of 10% rather than 4.4%, perhaps that would provide us with the resources needed to get there, as you mentioned earlier.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: By welcoming more immigrants overall, it becomes more difficult to achieve any target, whether it's 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, or 8%, and even more resources would be required.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner and Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for three and a half minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Welcome, Commissioner.

To reach the 4.4% target, Canada would have had to admit over 75,000 more French-speaking permanent residents to regions outside Quebec between 2008 and 2020.

What do you think the percentage should be as of 2024 and beyond, and how many French-speaking permanent residents would have to be admitted to achieve it?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: The number would depend on the federal objective, which is to say...

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Commissioner, based on your own experience and what you may have heard about this matter, what would you suggest?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: I don't have figures for you right now. What I'm aiming at is a percentage that is higher than 4.4%. We need a much more ambitious target than the one we have now. The absolute number will increase in accordance with the overall target set by the federal government.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Very good.

Earlier, you said that we should do certain things differently. I appreciated the way you expressed it.

Given the decline in French, what should the government do to maintain the long-term settlement of new French-speaking permanent residents who choose to settle in an official language minority community?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: Integration and settlement programs have been established, and I think they need to be enhanced. We need to establish links between the community and newcomers, or they will go to other communities. It's therefore important to integrate them into their community. It's true that we need workers, but it mustn't be forgotten that newcomers need to be properly integrated into our communities.

If we provide the means and programs needed to do that, we'll be able to increase the retention rate. That's important because we are investing a lot on attracting immigrants to our communities. Once again, I repeat that we need retention programs for them. The organizations are in place, but are they properly equipped to do their work? That's another question we have to ask ourselves.

• (1700)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Would you agree that this requires close collaboration between the provincial governments and the Canadian government?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: The federal government, the provinces and the communities need to work together. This kind of partnership has to work from the bottom up so that we can eventually adopt a holistic approach. That would promote retention and the best possible integration of immigrants into our communities.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Commissioner.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

I'd like to thank you, Commissioner, Mr. Leduc and Ms. Gervais, for being with us today. Before leaving the meeting, I would ask you to please send all of the information we requested in writing to the clerk. If you think there are other documents that we might find useful, please don't hesitate to send them along.

Having said that, we are now going to have to suspend the meeting so that the committee members can go and vote.

The meeting is suspended.

We will have to return after the vote, dear colleagues, to discuss the committee's work. Please use the second zoom link that the clerk sent to you today.

[Proceedings continue in camera.]

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