



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Official Languages

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 030

Thursday, September 22, 2022

Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 30 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, May 30, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of Bill C-13, An Act to amend the Official Languages Act, to enact the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act and to make related amendments to other Acts.

Today's meeting is in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House Order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members will attend in person or with the Zoom application, as we are now used to doing.

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

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you're on the videoconference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

Interpretation is available for those of you joining us on Zoom. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French audio. For those in the room, you can use your earpiece and select the desired channel.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the raise hand function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can, and we appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

Before we hear from our first witnesses, I would like to welcome, via Zoom, our clerk, Ms. Legault, and her assistant, Ms. La-belle.

I would now like to welcome our valiant witnesses.

Appearing in the first hour, we have the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, represented by Lynn Brouillette, Chief Executive Officer, and Martin Normand, Director, Strategic Research and International Relations.

We also have the Public Service Alliance of Canada, represented by Alex Silas, Regional Executive Vice-President, National Capital

Region, and Rosane Doré Lefebvre, Communications Officer. They are also joining us via videoconference. Mr. Silas comes from one of the most beautiful regions in Canada, although I won't tell you what region that is.

With that said, we will begin with Mr. Normand, who will be discussing issues important to the people he represents regarding the modernization of Bill C-13.

We are listening, Mr. Normand.

Mr. Martin Normand (Director, Strategic Research and International Relations, Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne): Thank you very much for this opportunity.

The ACUFC welcomed this bill when it was first introduced. The fact that all federal institutions will now be required to take the positive measures they consider appropriate to ensure more opportunities for francophone minorities to pursue quality learning in their own language throughout their lives, including at the post-secondary level, is a major improvement over Bill C-32. Even more significant, institutions will now have to deliver on this commitment knowing that the federal government has acknowledged the specific situation of French in this country.

We nevertheless wish to make three suggestions for clarifying part VII with respect to cooperation with the provinces, scientific research in French and other administrative measures.

I will start with cooperation with the provinces.

Federal institutions have a duty to ensure that positive measures are taken to enhance the vitality of the francophone minorities and to support and assist their development.

However, under the new subsection 45.1(1) introduced by the bill, the federal government recognizes the importance of cooperating with provincial and territorial governments in the implementation of part VII of the act. This provision, as drafted, could be interpreted to mean that the federal government's commitment to the vitality of the minorities is subject to a sharing of jurisdictions.

We believe the federal government cannot walk away from this commitment. Its willingness to cooperate with the provinces and territories must not undermine the vitality, development or maintenance of strong institutions. Instead the bill must establish favourable conditions for developing positive measures that will have a direct and continuing impact and be effectively and equitably implemented across the country.

We suggest that every reference to cooperation with the provinces and territories be reviewed to dispel any ambiguity regarding the federal government's exercise of its spending power to enhance the vitality of the minorities. If the implementation of positive measures were to depend on cooperation with the provinces and territories, the federal government's measures might ultimately be applied unevenly if reluctant governments refused to cooperate.

Now I will discuss scientific research in French.

The official languages reform document states that the federal government wishes to support the creation and dissemination of scientific information in French. However, we feel that the wording of new subparagraph 41(6)(c)(iv) is more restrictive and less ambitious. It provides that one of the positive measures the federal institutions might take would be to "support the creation and dissemination of information in French that contributes to the advancement of scientific knowledge".

The reform document suggests that those measures would support the creation and dissemination of scientific knowledge created by the francophone research community. However, the bill implies that all types of information are considered equal and that they may come from various sources. For example, the translation into French of information produced by federal institutions could qualify as scientific knowledge, which would be redundant, having regard to what is already provided in part IV of the act, which concerns communications with the public.

We suggest that this subparagraph be reviewed to make it more consistent with the commitment expressed in the reform document. The original version was much more foundational for the post-secondary sector than the version proposed in the bill.

Turning now to other administrative measures.

A modernized Official Languages Act is not an end in itself. It is merely one piece, albeit a very important one, in the whole architecture of Canada's language regime. Other administrative measures must emerge, including two that will definitely follow from this bill.

The first such measure will be regulations establishing the terms and conditions under which the obligations set forth in part VII are to be performed. Those regulations may clarify the nature of the positive measures, the consultations they require, the accountability models respecting them, and the direct effects of government decisions. However, new subsection 41(3) does not establish a schedule on which those regulations will be made. The same possibility was introduced in the 1988 act, but no regulations subsequently emerged. We suggest that the act include a timetable for making regulations respecting part VII.

The second measure is the policy on francophone immigration. We simply want to express a wish, that the policy that is developed accommodate the international clientele of post-secondary institutions, an immigration pool that is essential if we are to achieve the objectives of the federal government's francophone immigration strategy.

Many stakeholders have great ambitions for this act, but history tells us you can never legislate on political leadership. A firm moral

commitment from the political class will always be necessary. We ask you to lend substance to this commitment and to cooperate so the bill is promptly passed and we can work together on the next foundational measures that will enable Canada to progress toward substantive equality of English and French.

• (1110)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Normand.

Pardon me, but I forgot to inform the witnesses that they had five minutes each for their presentations. However, you didn't exceed your five minutes, Mr. Normand.

Mr. Silas, you come from a magnificent region, and you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Alex Silas (Regional Executive Vice-President, National Capital Region, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Mr. Chair, members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I want to thank you for your invitation to appear on the subject of Bill C-13.

My name is Alex Silas and I am regional executive vice-president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada for the National Capital Region. I am also proud to be from Acadie, the most marvelous region in the country.

PSAC represents more than 230,000 workers across Canada and around the world. Our members work in federal departments and agencies, crown corporations, universities, community service agencies, indigenous communities and airports. We represent workers who use French in the workplace, or who wish to do so, across Canada.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that all workers have the right to speak and work in the federal public service in the official language of their choice. I believe we all agree on that. Unfortunately, although that's true on paper, improving bilingualism in the public service simply does not appear to be a priority for this government. PSAC sincerely believes that the federal government can do more to promote and protect the official languages in our institutions.

This unfair situation became more obvious during the pandemic. Most people worked at home and saw each other only virtually. It was harder for our francophone members to work during that time as a result of information sent in English only, work meetings without interpretation and managers who were unable to communicate effectively in their second language, and those are only a few examples of the language barriers that our members have reported and that were exacerbated by the pandemic.

If we want to build a dynamic, diverse and bilingual public service, we have to establish a climate in which employees can work in the language of their choice and are encouraged to do so. The federal government has a duty to provide the tools they need to get there. The Canadian public service should be a place where the employer encourages and supports bilingualism.

Bill C-13, the first major reform of the Official Languages Act in more than 30 years, is a step in the right direction, but it lacks the necessary punch to protect French in Canada or to promote bilingualism across the federal public service.

The timing is right because PSAC is currently negotiating with the Treasury Board on behalf of more than 165,000 employees. We are proposing several measures to improve bilingualism in the federal public service, in addition to new provisions for indigenous workers who speak or write in an indigenous language in the performance of their duties. With the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation approaching, we should not forget to support indigenous languages in Canada.

Raising the bilingualism bonus is one of the examples of what we're seeking at the bargaining table. The bonus has not been updated since 1977 and has remained at \$800 for nearly 50 years. The government has refused to change its position despite our repeated requests that it review its policy. What's worse is that, in the 2019 report, the government even proposed to eliminate the bonus. We feel that's entirely unacceptable.

If the government really wants to support official languages, PSAC believes it must raise the bilingualism bonus to acknowledge the value of work done in both official languages and offer more language training to encourage anglophone and francophone workers to improve their second language. PSAC also proposes that an additional amount be allocated to federal workers who speak an indigenous language in order to attract and retain more indigenous workers and acknowledge their life experience.

We know from information gathered by the Joint Committee on the Use of Indigenous Languages in the Public Service that 450 federal workers use indigenous languages in the course of their work. They deserve to be recognized for the value they contribute to the federal public service.

As Parliament has taken legislative action to increase recognition of indigenous languages, the federal government, as an employer, should set an example and officially acknowledge the contributions of its employees who use indigenous languages in performing their duties.

Lastly, if the government, as the employer, truly wants to support official languages, it has a duty to make language training accessible to employees free of charge. More language training is required to encourage anglophone and francophone workers to develop their second language. We also ask that the Treasury Board stop contracting out language training and focus on creating its own training and translation program administered by public service workers who can focus on the specific requirements of the federal public service.

PSAC hopes that the government will reverse its decision and agree to the language demands we have made at the bargaining table. It is high time the employer made the right decision. We would also like the committee to take this opportunity to support official languages in the public service because Bill C-13, as currently drafted, is toothless legislation.

Thank you for your time, and I would be pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you very much.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Silas.

We will now begin a first round of questions, in which every intervention will be six minutes, with the vice-chair of this committee.

Mr. Godin, you have six minutes.

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

Right off the top, I'd like to let the representatives of both groups know that my remarks will be quite short, because the time allotted to us today is very limited, as it has been throughout the process regarding the modernization of the Official Languages Act.

First, I'd like to go to you, Mr. Normand. You mentioned immigration and political leadership. Does Bill C-13 meet the needs of your organization?

Mr. Martin Normand: We spoke out about Bill C-13 as soon as it was introduced. Generally speaking, it's consistent with our ambitions. We had issues with certain parts of Bill C-32, but they were resolved by Bill C-13.

Today we suggested some amendments to clarify certain aspects, but the bill has what it takes for us to be able to move forward.

Mr. Joël Godin: You're satisfied the see four lines about immigration in the bill.

Mr. Martin Normand: Our view is that the bill sets forth the government's commitment to develop an immigration policy. We have expectations for that policy, particularly regarding the international clientele of our institutions. We want to be able to implement that policy as soon as possible so it has a foundational impact on our institutions and the communities that accept those students, and to support the federal government by helping it meet its francophone immigration targets.

Mr. Joël Godin: Just to confirm what you're saying.

You're satisfied with the content of the bill and therefore the fact that the government will require the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to develop a plan, even though there will be no accountability, evaluation or indicators.

Mr. Martin Normand: We're satisfied that it states the commitment to develop a policy. That's more than an action plan.

Mr. Joël Godin: We're nowhere near achieving a result. The commitment to develop a policy is the most pragmatic thing, but it's good that you're satisfied.

Our objective is to ensure that the modernization of the Official Languages Act is implemented as soon as possible, but we're nevertheless going to take the time to do things right. What we want is to stop the decline of the French language in Canada, which is a bilingual country.

Do you think the bill is an adequate response to the situation and that it will start halting the decline of French once it's enacted?

• (1120)

Mr. Martin Normand: Even though we're reinforcing the act, it will be enough to stop the decline of French. The entire architecture of the Canadian language regime has to be reinforced.

A whole series of administrative measures were announced in the official languages reform document released in February 2021. We think that the act, the next action plan and the administrative measures set forth in the official languages reform document constitute a whole that could slow or reverse the decline of French.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you.

I'll direct my other questions to Mr. Silas, from the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

The bill provides that employees may work in the language of their choice. However, we know that, since the anglophone majority predominates, francophones simply avoid speaking French and join that group.

How will the bilingualism bonus alter the fact that francophone employees unfortunately can't work in French? How will that promote an increase in the use of French in the Canadian public service?

Mr. Alex Silas: Thank you for your question.

It recognizes the work that employees do and the fact that they can speak both languages. It will also encourage more workers to take training, which must be more accessible, to improve their second language skills, and that will create a more bilingual work environment in the federal public service.

Mr. Joël Godin: You said in your statement that the Treasury Board should develop and offer language training that's accessible and free of charge. Can you tell me how accessible and free training will help halt the decline of the French language in Canada?

Mr. Alex Silas: The fact that this training is made available will stop the decline of the French language in Canada because it will be an opportunity for federal public service employees to improve their second language and thus to feel more comfortable speaking it. Francophones will speak French with their colleagues and ensure they're understood, and anglophones and allophones will be able to speak both languages and ensure they're understood too.

Mr. Joël Godin: What tools do we have to encourage the use of French in the public service? I know the bill offers a choice in that regard, but are there any other amendments we could make to the bill to give it more teeth?

You said the bill lacked punch. Can you help us give it a little more?

Mr. Alex Silas: You could raise the bilingual bonus. Incentives should be offered to promote both official languages and make

training more accessible, and to ensure it's given by the federal public service, not by contractors.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, gentlemen.

We would be pleased to read and consider any other information you could provide us for the purpose of proposing amendments.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

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

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

Thanks to both witnesses for appearing before the committee and sharing their ideas for improving Bill C-13 and helping the official language minority communities across the country to move forward.

I'll start with you, Mr. Normand.

You mentioned cooperation with the provinces and favourable conditions. You said we should review some of the policies set forth in Bill C-13. I'd like you to tell us more about that.

The provinces' jurisdiction over education and the federal government's role obviously have to be considered. Your members include many post-secondary educational institutions. Without encroaching on provincial jurisdictions, how could the federal government take part in the process without really telling them what to do?

With respect to post-secondary education, Laurentian University and Campus Saint-Jean are obviously facing some significant challenges.

Do you have any suggestions for amending the bill and helping the federal government work with the provinces?

• (1125)

Mr. Martin Normand: We obviously recognize that post-secondary education is a provincial jurisdiction. However, we also think that, given the federal government's commitment to enhance the vitality of the communities and support strong institutions across the country—that commitment is set forth in the Official Languages Act—it can nevertheless play a role in education. It can use its spending power to establish measures to support and sustain the post-secondary education sector.

Here's the concern we have regarding cooperation with the provinces. We at ACUFC have relations with seven or eight departments; we don't just work with the Department of Canadian Heritage. Positive measures could be created in a whole range of departments. They could be perceived as the responsibility of the provinces, but they would have been introduced by the federal government in the hope of contributing directly to the vitality of the communities.

If we rely too much on cooperation with the provinces in introducing positive measures, we could wind up deploying those measures unequally across the country. In other words, positive measures would apply in certain provinces, but not in others. Some post-secondary institutions would benefit from those measures, whereas others wouldn't, and the institutions would be competing with each other as a result of that uneven deployment. They won't have the same power to act if they don't have access to positive measures designed by the federal government but rejected by the provinces.

We have to develop the right vocabulary to ensure that measures are fairly deployed in cooperation with the provinces. We could come up with a mechanism to ensure the provinces are aware of the positive measures introduced so they aren't surprised. That mechanism might be a specific forum or space where the provinces and territories can discuss issues with the post-secondary institutions. In short, there has to be a better arrangement to prevent the provinces from resisting and ultimately rejecting positive measures introduced in their jurisdiction.

Mr. Marc Serré: Major improvements to positive measures have been made in bills C-32 and C-13. What positive measures should we focus more on?

Mr. Martin Normand: Positive measures will follow from the regulations. We'll propose them once we know how a positive measure is defined. They won't be set forth in the act but rather in the action plan and other plans in the provinces. Since official languages are a crosscutting issue, they may extend beyond the scope of the action plan.

However, there's one that we can think of. A budget of \$121 million over three years was promised to support post-secondary institutions, and the Liberal Party promised to double that and make it permanent. The extra step that we'd like to see would be to ensure that the mechanism for distributing that funding meets the actual needs of the institutions and isn't limited to ad hoc projects. Those kinds of projects can definitely address emergencies, but they don't have a foundational impact on the network as a whole. Consequently, we have to find the right solution so that money has the impact the federal government would like it to have within the institutions.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you very much.

Mr. Silas, thank you for your efforts. Early on in my career, I was a member of the public service for four years.

You currently have a working group focusing on second-language training and distance learning. Can you tell us more about that in 30 seconds?

What positive measures or ideas could we come up with to improve matters as you continue your consultations on second-language training?

• (1130)

Mr. Alex Silas: Documents must be sent in both official languages and managers must be able to communicate in both official languages

Information disseminated within the federal public service and to the Canadian public must be effectively communicated in both offi-

cial languages. Once again, I would also mention the bilingualism bonus and access to in-house training.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Silas and Mr. Serré.

The second vice-chair of our committee will ask the next questions.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): My first question will be for Mr. Normand, from the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne.

When you consider federal funding for universities and colleges, you discuss positive measures, by which I mean agreements and memoranda of understanding with the provinces and so on.

Have you also looked at all the federal grants that are provided through other channels such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Health Canada, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. There are a lot of foundations. Have you looked into that?

Mr. Martin Normand: We're in touch with the major granting councils to ensure that they provide adequate funding for French-language research and research on francophone communities and that the condition that research be conducted in French across the country is adequately met.

So we're in touch with them, and that's why we hope the commitment to support scientific research will be clearer in the bill to ensure that the granting councils, which fall under the umbrella of Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, are more directly called upon to take action and establish new positive measures to improve the situation of French-language research.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I don't know whether you've considered the case of Quebec more extensively, but, in overall terms, anglophone universities in Quebec receive 30% of funding, even though mother tongue anglophones represent 8.4% of the population. According to figures from 2000 to 2017, federal funding for English-language universities rose from 34.5% of total funding to 38.4% over that period.

According to the only study I've seen that deals with this, funding for French-language university services outside Quebec—I don't mean French-language universities, since there aren't many—fall below the percentage of francophones in the population

Have you looked at that?

Mr. Martin Normand: We looked at some figures, particularly with the Institutes of Health Research, to get a clearer picture of what's being invested in French-language research. Apart from that, what we've managed to document, particularly through the summit on French-language post-secondary education and the Association francophone pour le savoir, or ACFAS, as part of a major research project that has been conducted in recent years, is that there are systemic barriers to conducting research in French in Canada.

Apart from the money that goes to anglophones or francophones, there are barriers that put francophones at a disadvantage in the scholarship-awarding process. We see this at our member institutions. However, I can't speak for Quebec institutions. There are measures here that we could implement with the granting councils to reduce those barriers and facilitate access to research funding for our researchers, and to ensure that grant applications are reviewed fairly and French-language knowledge is also adequately disseminated.

That's why we feel that the suggestion we're making with respect to the part of Bill C-13 concerning scientific information in French is important. It would lend substance to the far more foundational commitment outlined in the February 2021 white paper.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Perhaps I'll send you some documentation. This has been under study in Quebec for some years. There's a real imbalance between funding for English-language universities in Quebec and that for francophone universities and colleges outside Quebec.

My next question is for the people from the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

According to a recent Radio-Canada study, 68% of federal public servants in Quebec are required to be bilingual compared to only 13% outside Quebec. Other studies have shown that more than 40% of francophones across Canada, in Quebec and elsewhere, aren't comfortable working in French. Do you have any measures to suggest that might alter that trend?

The Quebec government has forwarded its demands. In particular, it asks that we take measures to ensure that French is the predominant language in federal institutions located in regions with large francophone populations.

What you think of that?

• (1135)

Mr. Alex Silas: I agree with it entirely. Linguistic insecurity exists within the federal public service. We often hear that the federal public service is anglophone or bilingual, but not anglophone and francophone. The pandemic has definitely exacerbated the situation.

Francophones often feel they have to speak their second language, English, when interpretation isn't available or not fast enough, so their colleagues can understand. Anglophones, in turn, don't feel comfortable speaking French for fear of being judged.

The employer has a duty to make language training accessible and free of charge for its workers. If the government really wants to support both official languages and to address linguistic insecurity, it must expand language training in house to encourage its anglophone and francophone workers to improve their second language.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Are there any places in New Brunswick's public service where French is the common language?

Mr. Alex Silas: Absolutely. New Brunswick is a proudly bilingual province with a large Acadian population that mainly speaks French in the workplace and in their communities. I would add that there are francophone communities across the country, in Ontario, Alberta and Yukon. We're virtually everywhere and we should have

the option of speaking both English and French, especially in the government.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Silas.

We will end this final six-minute round of questions with Ms. Ashton, who is speaking to us from Manitoba.

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

I'd like to welcome our witnesses, including my former colleague Doré Lefebvre. It's very nice to see you in this committee.

First I have some questions for the PSAC people.

I'll start off by telling you that we very much appreciate the work you're doing to acknowledge the indigenous languages spoken by public service employees. This is a measure that we support 100%, and we hope the government will establish a bilingualism bonus for indigenous workers who speak their language in the public service. This is a matter of fairness, but also reconciliation.

My question is for Mr. Silas and concerns the bill.

The right of francophones to work in French in the public service has long been threatened. Yvon Barrière, vice-president of PSAC's Quebec region, illustrated the problem when he said that deputy ministers and senior officials shouldn't be limited to being able to work in the language of their choice but should also be able to do so in the language of the employees they work with.

Although 31% of public service employees are francophone, only 19% of deputy ministers and associate deputy ministers can speak French. The Commissioner of Official Languages, Raymond Thériault, reacted to the tabling of Bill C-13 by observing that not many changes or improvements had been made regarding the right to work in the language of one's choice.

How do PSAC members view the impact of this bill when the measures proposed in it clearly don't address the scope of the problem?

Mr. Alex Silas: Thank you for that question, Ms. Ashton, and for reminding me that francophones in Manitoba also have a right to be served in French.

As my colleague Mr. Barrière noted, PSAC members tell us they don't feel comfortable speaking the language of their choice when their manager is unable to communicate in both languages. All federal public service workers should have the option of speaking in the language in which they feel most comfortable.

To achieve that goal, we must improve access to training, and that training must be provided in house. Measures must also be introduced to encourage people to improve their second language by, for example, increasing the bilingualism bonus, which hasn't been raised in half a century.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

I have a second question for you.

Language training needs clearly aren't temporary. Language training is a continuing need in the public service and will remain so, as you said, as long as French is still threatened. If language training is a permanent need in the public service, it makes no sense to me that it should constantly be contracted to outside suppliers.

Shouldn't the public service have its own language training provided by its own workers?

• (1140)

Mr. Alex Silas: Absolutely. We have numerous examples that show that contracting out and privatizing public services reduce service quality for both public servants and the public, and language training services are no exception. All language training and translation services should be provided in house, and that training should be provided by federal public service employees.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for your answers.

My next question is for you, Mr. Normand.

The last time people from your organization appeared before this committee we had a chance to discuss the shortcomings of the official languages in education program. Programs like OLEP don't help post-secondary educational institutions carry out their mandates since funding isn't provided on a project basis.

In our view, the government should include in the Official Languages Act an obligation to negotiate language clauses to ensure that francophone communities receive the services they deserve, and the government should intervene in the absence of such provisions.

Failing an agreement with the provinces, should the federal government grant funding to post-secondary educational institutions that provide services to official language minority communities to help them carry out their mandate?

Mr. Martin Normand: Thank you for your question, Ms. Normand.

The federal government sets public policy objectives, and we believe that our postsecondary institutions will be allies in achieving these objectives. With this measure, the federal government could intervene directly with our institutions to support the programs, activities and services they provide. It would enable the government to meet its targets.

The federal government has set an individual bilingualism target level for 2036, and another for francophone immigration. Our institutions contribute directly to meeting these two targets. There are also targets for access to early childcare services. That will be the responsibility of our colleges. They need to provide this training if we are to have enough francophone and bilingual workers to provide services in French in childcare centres.

Our institutions can be key players if the federal government adopts appropriate public policy objectives. The federal government can take action and provide direct support to institutions.

The Chair: Thank you very much Mr. Normand.

That's it, Ms. Ashton.

We'll begin the second round of questions with Mr. Gourde.

Over to you for five minutes Mr. Gourde.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for being here. I'll be brief, because five minutes is not a lot of time.

My first question is for you Mr. Normand.

Are you in favour of the several amendments requested by the Commissioner of Official Languages in his brief?

Mr. Martin Normand: We're here to defend the positions we put forward in our brief. The Commissioner can defend the positions he seeks to strengthen his role.

We believe the Commissioner is a key player who must have the means and resources to ensure that federal institutions comply with the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Normand, do you want to amend section 41, which does not provide a timeline for the introduction of regulations? You have said that Bill C-13 Should include a timeline. Should it be four months, six months, a year, two years? What do you think it should be?

Mr. Martin Normand: I don't have a specific opinion about the timing. I think we need to allow the stakeholders and the government to establish the regulations. But this needs to be done soon. The timeline would avoid the mistake that was made in 1988, meaning promising regulations that were never introduced and are still not there 35 years later.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So you believe that it is important to establish a timeline. If the act doesn't specify one, it will likely still take a long time.

Mr. Martin Normand: We believe that the political will is there for regulations, but we would feel reassured if a deadline could be set so that all official languages stakeholders would have a framework from which they could work to devise, deploy and evaluate positive steps.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So you would be in favour of an amendment like that.

Mr. Martin Normand: Yes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Silas, let's get back to part V of the Official Languages Act.

Am I correct in saying that not all public servants have the right to work in the official language of their choice and that they can only do so in specified places, designated back in 1977? That means that in the public service, there are regions in Canada where you can speak in English and in French, or even only in French, and other regions where you can speak only in English.

Does that make sense?

• (1145)

Mr. Alex Silas: No, I wouldn't say it makes sense. There are francophone communities across Canada, from sea to sea, and workers in these communities must be able to work in the language of their choice.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: The areas in question were designated in 1977 on the basis of the 1971 census.

Would you like to see an amendment that would update these designated regions?

Mr. Alex Silas: Yes. Definitely. They have not been reviewed since the 1970s. It's high time for a review of them, and of the bilingualism bonus.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Getting back to the bilingualism bonus, which has been \$800 for 25 years, you said that you would like to see it increased, but you didn't suggest an amount.

Mr. Alex Silas: It's more like 50 years without a review. What we asked for at the bargaining table was an increase to \$1,500.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay.

What do you think the level of bilingualism ought to be for public servants to be entitled to this bonus, given that there are several proficiency levels? Should it be the beginner level or higher?

Mr. Alex Silas: It should be the same language level that currently entitles them to the \$800 bonus. Only the amount would change.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Some would say that in Canada today, knowing both official languages is a prerequisite to working in the public service, and that this bonus should accordingly be eliminated. They say that if you're not bilingual, you can't find a job in the federal government, but I think that's completely false. There are a lot of unilingual anglophones working in the federal government, but we don't see very many unilingual francophones.

Is that true?

Mr. Alex Silas: Yes, absolutely. There is a huge disparity between the number of unilingual English-speaking managers and the number of unilingual French-speaking workers, who don't have the same opportunities for advancement.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: To return to the designated regions, should these be reviewed every time there is a census, meaning every five years, or should the review be for the next 50 years?

Mr. Alex Silas: It shouldn't be as long as 50 years. I don't know whether it should be done every five years, but it should be as often as needed to provide an accurate representation of the population and of bilingualism in Canada.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: There were problems at Air Canada; I believe you are aware of these. Should there be an amendment to re-

quire Air Canada to be more conciliatory and to comply with the act?

Mr. Alex Silas: Yes, I think companies like Air Canada should be more inclusive in terms of bilingualism. I would add that it's the federal government's responsibility, as an employer, to show leadership and set a good example for bilingualism in the workplace.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you Mr. Silas and Mr. Gourde.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio, You have six minutes.

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

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Silas. You mentioned that public servants should be able to communicate in the language of their choice and receive language training. Your main goal appears to be raising the bilingualism bonus for public servants, because the current bonus appears to be encouraging a culture of simply passing the test rather than achieving results.

Could you spell out what you are asking for in terms of employee communication in the language of their choice and language training, including distance learning?

Mr. Alex Silas: I mentioned the increase in the bilingualism bonus several times because it's one of the main things we are asking for. It's one of the most concrete ways of promoting bilingualism in the federal public service. However, we would also like to have easier access to free language training. We would also like training and translation to be carried out within the public service, to ensure that managers are able to communicate in both languages and that all information, whether for workers or the public, be released in both official languages.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, information for the public was often not very well translated, causing major problems that could lead to a health and safety crisis for the public. It's essential for all information to be accessible in both languages.

• (1150)

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Isn't the bilingualism bonus considered an integral part of collective agreements between parties at the National Joint Council, which includes the bargaining agents from the public service, the Treasury Board and a number of distinct employers.

Did your organization, the PSAC, support a cyclical review of the bilingualism bonus directive at the National Joint Council?

Mr. Alex Silas: We certainly raised this priority at the National Joint Council and at the bargaining table.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: You also spoke about the importance of indigenous languages.

Could you explain in detail what you mean by improving or enhancing communication with indigenous peoples?

Mr. Alex Silas: Certainly.

Following our last round of negotiations with the Treasury Board, we established a joint committee with the Treasury Board and the PSAC to review the use of indigenous languages in the workplace in the public service.

We identified at least 450 positions in which workers had to use an indigenous language for their work. It's a talent that deserves to be recognized and promoted by the government, as an employer, and these workers should be entitled to bonuses that acknowledge the fact that they are providing an essential service in communities where indigenous languages are still being used.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Wouldn't indigenous people also have English as a second language?

Mr. Alex Silas: For many of them, English is their second language, but they appear to be more at ease communicating in their mother tongue, their indigenous language. It's important to recognize the value of this to the federal public service. Recognition is also needed for the fact that it is part of our commitment as a country and a government to reconciliation with indigenous peoples.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Do you have any studies about this whole issue of indigenous languages, data, studies, or statistics that you could provide to the committee?

Mr. Alex Silas: Various statistics have indeed been established by the joint committee. I can tell you that at least 450 workers were identified as having to communicate in an indigenous language. It's absolutely essential in these communities to be able to provide services in the local population's language, which is more comfortable communicating in their indigenous language.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I understand, based on what the chair said, that you are from the most beautiful province in Canada. I'm from the province of Quebec.

Do you have statistics or data about the use of French or English in the federal public service?

Mr. Alex Silas: Do you want statistics for New Brunswick or the whole country?

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Statistics for New Brunswick and Canada.

Mr. Alex Silas: Quebec is also a very beautiful province, it would seem.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Yes, the most beautiful.

Mr. Alex Silas: We can get you the statistics, but I know that New Brunswick is a proudly bilingual province. Most of the people in New Brunswick frequently communicate in both languages, sometimes at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lattanzio. That's all the time you have.

Mr. Beaulieu will be asking the next questions.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As for the Public Service Alliance, about 40% of francophone workers are not comfortable working in French. So it's difficult when the common language in a working environment is the one used by everyone to communicate. Generally speaking, I think English is used, as we heard in the testimony. So it's clear that people are not necessarily at ease speaking French.

If the government were to do something in the regions where there are lots of francophones to ensure that French was used as the main language of work, do you think that might have a beneficial impact?

Mr. Alex Silas: Thank you for your question.

It is in fact true that the main language of work in the federal public service is English. Everything is initially written in English and then translated. It's not done in French. Concrete measures are required to ensure that the information provided in French to the workers is more than a mere translation. The level of bilingualism among managers and senior officials leaves a lot to be desired. When agencies and departments are reorganized, francophone employees may find themselves being supervised by unilingual anglophone managers. That means that these workers lose the ability to communicate in the language of their choice.

• (1155)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do you think that senior officials and managers should be required to be proficient in French and bilingual, as was proposed by the Commissioner of Official Languages? Do you feel this would be a worthwhile proposal for bill Bill C-13?

Mr. Alex Silas: I would say so. It's best to deal with things head on and to set a good example, and one of the best ways of doing that would be for senior management to be trained to be able to communicate effectively with workers in both official languages.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As for...

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In that case, I'll let you have the last word, Mr. Silas.

Mr. Alex Silas: Access to training needs to be enhanced. Managers must be able to communicate with workers in both official languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Silas.

We have now got to the final round of questions.

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

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

Mr. Normand, in February, you said:

By referring to part VII of the Official Languages Act... we think that [the federal government] could use its spending authority to ensure that postsecondary educational institutions... have the funding they need fulfil the various missions that are helping the federal government achieve its own objectives...

You believe that this would give the government the latitude to intervene directly in financing the mission of higher education institutions. Is that right?

Mr. Martin Normand: Yes, we definitely think that the federal government could do that. It is already doing it in the field of research, moreover, through the granting agencies. Money is given directly to researchers in our institutions to conduct important research projects that produce convincing data that can be used by the communities, the researchers and governments.

Ms. Niki Ashton: In negotiations with the provinces, both parties must accept the language clauses to ensure that they are in the agreement. If negotiations become deadlocked, the francophone communities should not be the ones to pay the price.

Do you think the federal government should intervene directly to support service offerings, in education for example, by funding the French-language educational mission in postsecondary educational institutions?

This ties in somewhat with what I asked you previously, but I want to emphasize the fact that the federal government needs to act directly to protect and promote French-language education.

Mr. Martin Normand: Yes, absolutely. That's why we say that for things like the current envelope for postsecondary education, which could become permanent, the right mechanism needs to be found to allow provinces to sit at the table, without preventing the federal government from directly supporting our institutions so that they could fulfil their important mission of fostering the growth and development of francophone institutions in Canada, a commitment made by the federal government itself.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Normand and Ms. Ashton.

On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank the representatives of the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne and the Public Service Alliance of Canada for having taken the time to come and testify today.

If you believe that there is other important information that would be useful to us, please don't hesitate to send it in writing. It would be given the same level of consideration as your testimony here today. If so, please send this additional information to our clerk, who will then distribute it to all members of the committee.

Thank you very much.

We will now suspend the meeting to prepare for the second hour with the next group of witnesses.

● (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1200)

● (1220)

The Chair: We are now reconvening the meeting.

Unfortunately, the second hour of the meeting will be shorter than expected because of some technical problems we have been experiencing.

We will now welcome Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois, the Vice-President of the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique, who will be joining us by videoconference.

Ms. Dubois, You're going to have five minutes for your presentation. After that, committee members will in turn be able to ask you questions to which you can reply.

You now have the floor.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois (Vice-President, Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

I'd like to begin by thanking you for having invited our federation to inform you about the issues affecting francophones on the Pacific coast in connection with the modernization of the Official Languages Act. We are relying on you, as members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, to protect minority francophone communities, particularly ours, because British Columbia is still the only province without any language legislation or policies on services in French.

I am here today to ask you to consider three amendments, two of which are joint, and a further one that is essential to our community and on which we will therefore spend more time. The organization that represents us nationally, the FCFA—the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada—shares several of our priorities for the modernization of the Official Languages Act.

The first thing we are asking for is the designation of a single central agency responsible for coordinating the implementation of the act.

The second is an amendment to Bill C-13 to create a government obligation to help restore the demographic weight of francophones through francophone immigration.

Last but not least, our request specifically pertains to the residents of British Columbia and is intrinsically tied to our court appeal, which led to the Federal Court of Appeal verdict on January 28. We have a specific existential issue tied to the federal-provincial agreements. Bill C-13 should contain an automatic process for the inclusion of a francophone component in all agreements signed by the federal government. I deliberately use this terminology to avoid the words "language clauses", because we know that this appears to have created a degree of reluctance thus far.

In British Columbia, we have experienced these agreements in a particular way, by means of the devolution agreements. These are not traditional administrative agreements for a program or a shared field of jurisdiction. The justice ruled that the province was sovereign with respect to the devolution at issue for the duration of the agreement. However, owing to this process, or these clauses, we have been systematically losing our services, because British Columbia does not have any language legislation or policies with respect to French-language services. We would like the act to be more specific with respect to the devolution agreements.

As we have already mentioned, without this amendment, the modernized Official Languages Act would at best have an impact in the field; at worst, it would sanction the erosion of the services to which we are entitled, and thereby contribute to the gradual decline in the number of francophones in Canada, as reported in the latest census. Without this amendment, we could neither support nor approve an exercise that our citizens would perceive as a completely fruitless political gesture.

To conclude, we expect the committee to make a strong commitment in order to avoid missing this unique opportunity to decisively strengthen the Official Languages Act and to guarantee the survival of French everywhere in Canada for the next 10 years.

Thank you.

● (1225)

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

We are beginning the first round of questions. The time available might only allow one round of questions, with six minutes for each speaker.

We'll begin with the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Joël Godin.

Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming, Ms. Dubois.

I'll get straight to the heart of the matter.

Ms. Dubois, you said that you agreed with the amendment your national organization strongly recommended, according to the effect that there should be a central agency. I don't think it is prepared to back off on this. There are three federal government central agencies, but the Treasury Board is perhaps best suited for the role.

What impact would there be on your organization if this amendment were not included as part of the modernization of the Official Languages Act?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: We recently experienced some of the possible consequences once again, in connection with our appeal. It's precisely because there is no central agency that we are unable to obtain services in French. If there were a central agency that imposed the regulations on the various departments, particularly for the language clauses, there wouldn't be this kind of problem. It's all interconnected, really.

Mr. Joël Godin: The central agency is the first factor. The second is the language clauses, I believe. Indeed, even with obligations, if the central agency decides not to enforce some requirements, clauses or agreements, then there is a gap. Unfortunately, francophones in British Columbia are victims and don't have access to services in French.

Let's move on immediately to the most important amendment for French in British Columbia. I am going to use the term "language clauses," even though you are not prepared to do so. I think that it's an important factor.

What do you feel the wording of the act should be to ensure that federal and provincial areas of jurisdiction are complied with? I'm in favour of these language clauses, but would like you, if you could, to provide the tools and the wording that would make it possible to comply with the federal-provincial agreements, and in particular, the provincial areas of jurisdiction.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I apologize, but I don't at the moment have an answer to your question about the specific terms to be included in the act.

Mr. Joël Godin: That's all right. We do in fact have the same objective: a mechanism to require that the language clauses are considered in order to make the federal-provincial agreements enforceable.

I would now like to suggest something to you, and you can tell me whether it's plausible. The federal-provincial agreements could be a factor. If additional funds were provided to encourage the provinces to introduce measures that include language clauses, it could be a way of respecting their areas of jurisdiction and providing more resources to those provinces that want to serve their francophone communities.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Definitely. I was about to say that money would be the best way to get there.

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

I have another question.

Do you believe that immigration is given enough attention in the current bill and that the wording has enough teeth to generate results and enable us to meet our objectives and our targets?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: No. That's precisely what we are asking for.

Mr. Joël Godin: Would you like amendments to the bill that would add more specific rules on immigration to the act? What would you like to see in the bill?

● (1230)

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: If I may, I'd like to ask my colleagues to send you various documents on that topic.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you.

So I believe we all agree on the three most important amendments for francophones in British Columbia—designating a single central agency, improving the approach to immigration in the modernization process for the Official Languages Act, and of course the question of the language clauses of which British Columbia was a victim. Have I understood correctly?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Definitely yes. For the language clauses, as I mentioned, I believe they might be called something else to make them more acceptable to everyone.

Mr. Joël Godin: Can you confirm that it's essential for British Columbia's francophones?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Absolutely. Otherwise, I don't see how our francophone communities could survive.

Mr. Joël Godin: You ended your presentation by saying that there would have to be strong commitments for the next 10 years. I personally believe that it requires a longer-term objective. Isn't 10 years a rather short period?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I agree with you. However, I have the impression that if our requests are reasonable, we're more likely to get something done. If the commitments extend beyond the 10 years, then so much the better. On the other hand, as it's a living language, it's not a bad idea to check where we stand. It's important to look at the past if we are to move forward afterwards. From that standpoint, a 10 year period might well be a sound approach.

Mr. Joël Godin: Unfortunately, I've run out of time.

Thank you, Ms. Dubois.

The Chair: Thank you Mr. Godin.

Thank you Ms. Dubois.

It's now over to Mr. Drouin for six minutes.

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

Thank you very much for your testimony, Ms. Dubois. I'm pleased that you had an opportunity to join our meeting in spite of the technical problems that appear to have surfaced at the outset.

I'd like to address the matter of the language clauses. I'm from Ontario, a Franco-Ontarian, but I have a general understanding of the francophone community in British Columbia. There is a lot of talk about the negotiations between the federal and provincial governments.

Can you briefly explain the British Columbia situation to me. You said that British Columbia has never had legislation to require French-language services or respect for the minority language community.

Do you have good relations with the government?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Yes. I would say that relations are cordial, but it's important to look at what happened. Why did we end up in court? Because we had lost our French-language employment services. People in the government are very kind, but all we get is good intentions. We need more than that.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Were any efforts made in British Columbia to make people aware of the importance of the language community? Does the government have at least some understanding of your status? There were ongoing cuts. I imagine that's why you went to court.

I want to return to the fact that a language clause could be included in the act, but if the province refused to sign on, we'd be no further ahead. Even if the clause were in the federal act, the province could say that it was all very well, but that it wouldn't sign and wouldn't reach an agreement with you.

What I'm trying to tell you is that the provinces have to be made aware of the importance of retaining our minority language communities. I know that the federal government definitely has a role to play in doing so. I support you in your efforts. I would have said the same thing if my government had treated me like that.

I'm trying to understand what's happening in British Columbia. Were efforts like these made? If our committee were to agree to include a language clause or language conditions in Bill C-13, I wouldn't want, in the next round of negotiations, to see that we were no further ahead because British Columbia didn't want to sign the agreement, whether for childcare services or third parties.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I truly believe that it wouldn't be a problem. If language conditions were included in the act, it would be signed, become a done deal and accepted.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Why then are cuts being made?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Precisely because there are no language conditions in the act. It's easy to make the cuts because there are no repercussions of any kind. I would do the same thing.

• (1235)

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay.

You spoke with Mr. Godin about the importance of immigration. The FCFA came up with some numbers. All the committee members are aware of the amendments submitted by the FCFA. We are thoroughly familiar with them, and we know what it wants. You've done an effective job with your lobbying efforts.

As for the percentage, 4% was discussed. At one point, the FCFA mentioned 10% to 20% instead. What does that mean for you in your community in British Columbia? How would Bill C-13 strengthen that?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: As we know, there is strength in numbers. At the moment, the number of francophones back home is decreasing. What's been proposed would enable us to increase the number of francophones in our community and enhance our ability to speak out.

Mr. Francis Drouin: When francophone immigrants arrive at Vancouver airport, are there any service counters that can serve them in French?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: We're working very hard on that. Only recently, a space was set up at the airport where messages are posted in French. We're very proud of it. It's a start. However, while receiving service in French is possible, it still takes a lot of effort.

Mr. Francis Drouin: If francophone immigrants go to British Columbia, what kinds of services can they expect to receive at this time?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Basic services only. They can call Relais, which will steer them to the right places for their various needs to be addressed.

Mr. Francis Drouin: In short, with respect to Bill C-13, you are in favour of the amendments proposed by the FCFA. You said so in your opening address.

I have only 30 seconds left.

Out of curiosity, I'd like to know whether you had the opportunity to take part in the consultation on the new Action Plan for Official Languages.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Not personally, but we submitted a brief.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

Ms. Dubois, the next questions for you will be coming from Mr. Mario Beaulieu, the second vice-chair of the committee.

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

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

Thank you for your testimony, Ms. Dubois.

You said that there were no language policies or legislation in British Columbia. Does that mean that there are no services in French? Is there a way of obtaining services in French?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: There are very few, and it's entirely dependent on the goodwill of the local people, because there is no specific policy.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I would imagine that it's only francophones who can accommodate you.

Is there a way of getting federal services in French, or is it difficult?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: It depends on where you are. I would say that generally, it's hard. Let's just say that you can't expect to get them automatically. You need to work hard at it.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Are British Columbia francophones concentrated in one particular region or area?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Not really. There's no concentration in any particular location.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It must be very difficult then.

What's needed is increased francophone immigration to British Columbia. Now Charles Castonguay looked into this for all of Canada, and found that assimilation was happening just as quickly for francophone immigrants, even on those occasions when they come from Quebec. This means that there are not many ways to make sure that people coming in as francophone immigrants are going to continue to use the French language or that they will be able to function in French.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: You really have to feel strongly about it.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You really do.

Are there many francophones where you live or do you have to go out of your way to meet other francophones?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I live in Victoria. I'm lucky to have a number of francophone people nearby.

Not only that, but as a member of the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique, we get together to speak French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Am I correct in saying that there are no French-language university services in British Columbia?

But there is Campus Saint-Jean, and we're told that it serves all of the western provinces.

● (1240)

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: There's a small university program at Simon Fraser University, and we're very proud of it, but it is very

small. We are sadly lacking from that standpoint. We would of course like to have more.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: So it's not easy.

Has there ever been, at any point in history, a higher percentage of francophones in British Columbia?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I don't know how far back you want to go. In fact it was francophones who built British Columbia. So at one point, there were more. Up until the time of the gold rush, there were more francophones here.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Basically, there was just a lack of political will.

I'd have to check my historical data, but was there ever legislation prohibiting the teaching of French in British Columbia? I'm asking because that's something that happened in just about all the provinces.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I apologize for not being able to answer that question directly, but what I can say is that while there may not have been any such legislation as such, it was certainly understood, as a kind of unwritten law.

I'm going to tell you a story. When I moved here, I had a neighbour who was francophone, but I didn't know it. I spoke to him in English and he answered in English. I eventually found out that he had moved here 20 years earlier, but that he had to hide the fact that he was francophone to avoid being treated as a second-class citizen. I've been here for 30 years now. That means that he had been reluctant to speak French for nearly 30 years.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I understand.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I don't know if there was any official law that prohibited speaking French. I can't answer you on that. However, I can tell you that there was certainly an unwritten law.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do you ever try to speak in French in businesses? How do people react?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: In general, here, there is no animosity in everyday interactions. At least, I don't notice any. When I go to the shops with my husband, if we speak French, people will often make an effort to say two or three words in French. They are proud to tell us that they went to immersion school and learned French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'd like to ask you another question, briefly.

Given the fact that British Columbia was founded by francophones and at one time had a majority of francophones, don't you think the federal and British Columbia governments have a duty to make amends?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I would say to you that a duty of reparation is a lot to ask. I would just like us to manage to live together and get basic services in French. I would be very happy if we succeeded in this, which would be made possible by amendments to Bill C-13.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Perfect.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dubois and Mr. Beaulieu.

We'll continue with more questions, this time from Ms. Ashton, from Manitoba, who has six minutes.

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

I want to welcome Ms. Dubois back.

Last February, in testimony before our committee, the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique reiterated the FCFA's demands, including the creation of a central agency, the addition of language clauses, the creation of a francophone immigration policy, order-making powers for the Commissioner of Official Languages, a clearer definition of affirmative measures, and the duty to consult communities.

The NDP has reviewed the proposed amendments sent to it by the FCFA and supports them.

Today I want to talk about the French-language clauses and why they are important. The child care agreement between the federal government and British Columbia is one of the few agreements in Canada with French-language clauses. However, it does not include a quota, nor does it require more targeted funding, nor does it specify a number of spaces for francophone and francophile parents. All we know is that the community will be consulted.

Have consultations begun?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I don't know if they have started, or will start.

We are really behind on this and I read something sad about it recently: this issue has been going on for a few years and could have been resolved before, but it hasn't been.

• (1245)

Ms. Niki Ashton: That is concerning.

I'm going to follow up with another question on this: do you think we should take anything away from the B.C. experience and the French-language clauses included in the child care agreement with the province?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Yes. Things need to be clearer, precise and more specific. We can't expect to achieve results just with the goodwill of our government. That cannot work.

Ms. Niki Ashton: As you know, I live in Manitoba and I have spoken extensively about the labour shortage in francophone day cares, including those in my area, and in the teaching community in remote areas where there are francophones and francophiles.

I have family in British Columbia and I know that this labour shortage also affects French immersion schools.

Could you talk about the importance of having agreements that would include language clauses with respect to child care or post-secondary education, particularly to help teachers? How would this contribute to the learning of the French language in our communities, such as those outside Quebec and Acadia?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I feel like you've said it all and I don't see what else I can add, except to say that you are absolutely right.

Ms. Niki Ashton: In fact, for us in the west, it is clear that there is a labour shortage.

Do you agree that this is a fairly urgent issue, if we are to retain our francophone communities and allow the next generation of francophones to grow up in them?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I totally agree.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you. I'll move on to another topic.

You've done a lot of work in the field of support for people experiencing homelessness. Is support for francophones experiencing homelessness one of the government's priorities? To your knowledge, do francophones experiencing homelessness in British Columbia have access to community support?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: People in Vancouver receive support from La Boussole, a francophone community centre. As for the others, they have some help.

We have to remember that all the people who work in the community centres are passionate. These people don't earn a big salary, and they couldn't do this job if they weren't passionate. We try to help people who need help as best we can, but apart from La Boussole, there is no really structured program.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

My last question is about immigration, an issue that impacts remote communities, such as those outside Quebec or New Brunswick, a great deal.

What support do you expect from the federal government to increase the number of francophone immigrants who settle in British Columbia's francophone communities?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: The services need to be more easily accessible and better known to them.

Ms. Niki Ashton: The FCFA has talked a lot about the need to set higher targets for francophone immigration across Canada. Do you agree?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Yes, I do. When you look at the figures from the last census, it's obvious that there must be some changes in that area.

Ms. Niki Ashton: As you said, if there are no services in French, people come, but leave rather than stay and build francophone communities.

Do you have a final message for our committee today?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I want to thank you for inviting me. I have confidence in you. I hope you can make these changes to the bill. That would be fantastic, because it could help our communities survive.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dubois.

We're going to do another round of questions with reduced speaking times. The Liberal Party and the Conservative Party will have four minutes each. The Bloc Québécois and the NDP will have two.

Mr. Généreux, you have four minutes.

• (1250)

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Good afternoon, Ms. Dubois.

I'm going to be very quick. You are telling us not to use the expression "language clauses". Why?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: From what we have heard, this creates a stir. If using other words gets a project accepted, why not do it? What we need...

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'm sorry to cut you off, but historically there has always been talk of "language clauses" in the act. What would using different terminology to say the same thing change? Do you think the public service would see it as a blunder? Who would be offended by the use of this phrase?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: From what I have heard, this creates problems. Therefore, let's use other terms if possible. What we want are clauses concerning the French language. Let's call them "francophone clauses".

Mr. Bernard Généreux: All right.

Your federation went to the Supreme Court to defend its point of view. If the three amendments you propose, which I quite agree with, were not incorporated into the act, do you think your federation might be forced to go back to the Supreme Court?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I would put it another way: if these amendments are made to the act, we will not need to go back to the Supreme Court. The process is still ongoing.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Are you talking about a legal process?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Yes, and that's exactly why. We always have to start over. In addition to our federation, other organizations have taken their case to court, like the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique. It's very expensive.

If the amendments are made to the act, we will no longer need to go to court. Imagine the difference this could make to our momentum and what we could do with our energy and money. Imagine if we didn't have to spend it to prove our right to French-language services and obtain them.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I totally agree with you on that.

Do you have any idea, any estimate of how much it has cost you over the last few years to defend your rights in court, whether at the Superior Court, the Supreme Court or somewhere else?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I don't have the exact figure in front of me, but I can tell you that it cost several million dollars.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Did you say millions or thousands of dollars?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I said several million dollars.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Where did the money come from, exactly? Did it come from the federation?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: You're talking to me about legal cases, but it wasn't just the federation's. In addition to ours, there was also the historic case that was won in relation to education, and there were also others in other provinces. Personally, I put them all together.

What I'm saying is that as francophone communities, we have spent a lot of money on this cause. Let me repeat that if these amendments were in the act, we wouldn't even have to go to court. That would be fantastic.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I totally follow you.

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

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You are generous, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Dubois, the last amendment you were talking about is about an inclusive process and accountability. I noted that, although you didn't spell it out in your opening remarks. Is accountability important to you, particularly with respect to the money that is sent to the provinces?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you mean.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'm going to let that go.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Généreux and Ms. Dubois.

The next questions will be asked by Mr. Angelo Iacono, who has four minutes.

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

Good afternoon, Ms. Dubois.

Following the tabling of Bill C-13, you stated that you were generally satisfied with its content. I'm happy about that. Also, you said earlier today that you were looking to coexist. It's really good to hear that.

In your statement, you referred to the automatic process and the fact that you are looking to have binding mechanisms with respect to jurisdictional transfer agreements.

Could you tell us a little bit more about those two aspects?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I must admit that I don't understand the first question. However, I will answer the second one by giving you a concrete example that we haven't even finished experiencing yet, that of the employment service centres.

We had francophone centres that were working very well and were very much used by French speakers. The delivery of their services, which originally came directly from the federal government, was then turned over to the provincial government. We then lost our francophone offices, because the province said it could provide those services, and that they didn't need those offices anymore; they were going to provide English offices only, and if we were lucky, there would be francophone employees there.

That is a very real example of why this is important.

• (1255)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: You talked about having a central agency. Are you still demanding that? Are you still asking for the bill to better outline the mechanisms?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Yes, this is part of the three requests from the federation that I presented here.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Very well.

In your speech you said you wanted an automatic process. Those are the words you used. Could you explain a little bit more about the mechanisms you favour for this automatic process and why you favour them?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I'm sorry. You are talking to me about an automatic process and I...

Mr. Angelo Iacono: You were the one who used those words.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: All right. I don't know where you took them from, or in what part of my speech I said that.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Okay. So I'll follow up with another question.

With respect to the amendments, which would be the most important one?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: The three amendments I mentioned are interrelated and are all important. The one on the French-language clauses is vital for us. Without this amendment, I don't know how my grandchildren will be able to speak to me in French. That's where we're at.

The Chair: You have 30 minutes left, Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That is all.

The Chair: Very well.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Ms. Dubois, you just spoke about your grandchildren: do they have access to French-language schools?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: Yes. Personally, I am lucky enough to live in Victoria. So my children were able to attend a nice French school. In other areas, this is not the case.

Again, it always comes back to a kind of passion. At the moment, if people manage to have and attend French schools, it is because they are convinced and passionate.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Was it a public or private school?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: My children went to public school.

A few years ago, we won a landmark lawsuit. We're on the way to restoring the situation, or at least we hope to, and having equivalent schools for francophones and anglophones. We're not there yet, but we're working on it.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's good.

We know that in federal institutions, French-language services are offered according to the general principle of where numbers warrant. This means that when the number of francophones decreases, there are fewer services in French.

Don't you think there should be a grandfather clause or that the provision of services should not be determined solely by the number and proportion of francophones? If we want growth, we shouldn't cut French services when there is a decline in the number of francophones.

I don't know if you have any ideas about this.

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I don't have a magic recipe, but I fully agree with you. Indeed, French-language services should be offered to those who need and request them.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dubois and Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Dubois, here is a final question from Ms. Ashton, who has two minutes.

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

Thank you as well, Ms. Dubois. We are learning a lot from your testimony. Indeed, it teaches us not only that language clauses are necessary, but also that they must be robust and have more content, deadlines and an obligation to produce results.

We can also think of the example of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. In your opinion, if this strategy included language clauses to protect the services offered to francophones, would organizations be better funded?

• (1300)

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: I hope so, because if you want to offer services, you have to have funding.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much for your clarity on this matter.

I would like to ask one last question, which is also a bit of a message.

If the government had been obliged by the Official Languages Act to negotiate service agreements for francophones, you obviously wouldn't have had to fight in court for all these years. I hope that all members of the committee, including government members, will hear you on their importance and not fight against the interests of francophones in Canada.

Do you have a message for those who resist the inclusion of language clauses in Bill C-13?

Ms. Marie-Nicole Dubois: In fact, I would like to understand what it takes away from them.

In my opinion, we are richer by having a better francophonie. Our country has two official languages and it seems to me that it would be good to be able to speak both. We can also speak others, but these two languages must be strong and robust.

These clauses do not take anything away from anyone. They only add something to the francophonie, but also to our country and its rich heritage. I am being philosophical, but...

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dubois. If there is any other information that the committee could benefit from, please feel free to put it in writing for us. It is as important as your oral testimony. If you feel this additional information is important, please forward it to our clerk, who will distribute it to all committee members.

Before adjourning, I would like to remind committee members that we meet next Tuesday. Next Thursday, the Board of Internal Economy will be using our space, so there will be no meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Thanks again, Ms. Dubois.

I also thank all the other witnesses we heard today.

The meeting is adjourned.

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