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• (0850)

[*Translation*]

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

Before I begin, I'd like to point out that yesterday, as you know, the Senate passed Bill C-13 by a majority vote without any amendments. I don't think there are any more Liberals in the Senate, they're all independents now. So I want to congratulate the whole team, because a lot of ink and sweat went into it.

Welcome to the 64th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

In accordance with Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on April 21, 2023, the committee is meeting to continue its study on increasing francophone immigration to Canada.

I wish to inform the committee that all MPs and witnesses have completed the required connection tests prior to the meeting. However, one of the witnesses had a scheduling conflict at the time of these tests. When he joins us virtually, we will pause briefly to do a sound test. All the others who are present virtually have done their sound tests.

To ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, I'd like to pass on some instructions to the witnesses and members.

Before speaking, please wait for me to recognize you by name. If you are participating in the meeting by videoconference, click on the microphone icon to activate it. Please mute your microphone when not speaking.

As far as interpretation is concerned, those present by Zoom have a choice at the bottom of their screen between the floor, English and French. Those in the room can use their headphones and select the desired language channel.

I remind you that all comments from members and witnesses must be addressed to the chair.

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses: Florence Ngenzebuhoro, president and CEO, and Aissa Nauthoo, vice-president, both from the Centre francophone du Grand Toronto; Marie-Josée Chouinard, vice-president of Talents internationaux et investissements étrangers, from Québec International; and Alain Laberge, who will be joining us shortly, from the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine. All are with us by videoconference.

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

• (0855)

Mrs. Florence Ngenzebuhoro (Chief Executive Officer, Centre francophone du grand Toronto): Good morning.

My name is Florence Ngenzebuhoro and I am the president and CEO of the Centre francophone du grand Toronto. I'm very honoured to be here this morning. I am accompanied by the vice-president, Ms. Aissa Nauthoo, whom I also consider an expert in francophone immigration.

As president and CEO of the Centre francophone du Grand Toronto, I want to thank you for this opportunity to share our observations and potential solutions pertaining to the challenges and opportunities associated with the increase in francophone immigration, as well as settlement services needs across Canada.

The centre is a multi-service organization that helps and supports over 50,000 French-speaking individuals each year. It has over 25 years of experience in providing settlement services to French-speaking newcomers in the Greater Toronto Area and throughout Canada.

Through our mandate to welcome and refer all francophone, anglophone and allophone newcomers arriving at Pearson Airport, the centre is the gateway and first experience of many newcomers to Canada. We also offer a wide range of complementary services to help newcomers integrate. This includes legal aid services managed by Ms. Aissa Nauthoo, who is with me today, employability and entrepreneurship services, primary and mental health care, and housing support. We thus strive to provide all of the services a newcomer to Canada might need.

As a result, the centre has a unique view of newcomers' needs and services issues along the continuum. We will share with you some of our findings and suggested solutions on how to better meet the needs of French-speaking newcomers.

Our findings are as follows. Since the implementation of French-language services at Pearson airport in 2019—we are very grateful to the federal government for offering this opportunity to francophones—we have noted challenges related to access to immigration services, and this applies throughout the continuum of services. We find that the journey of French-speaking immigrants, from their country of origin and after their arrival in Canada, is not always very complete or seamless. We know this from experience, because we are able to follow immigrants from their host country to the city where they settle.

For example, we've noticed that French-speaking newcomers arriving at Pearson airport aren't always aware of the services available, or haven't obtained enough information about these services prior to their arrival. Also, for those French-speaking newcomers who received reception and referral services at Pearson airport, i.e., those we welcomed, we found that they did not always contact settlement services or know about settlement services in their destination city. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada also presents administrative challenges and issues related to processing times for immigrant files, whether for those already on Canadian soil or those abroad.

These findings have highlighted some issues pertaining to the lack of systematic access to the services necessary for the successful integration of francophone newcomers throughout the continuum of services. In addition, there is a lack of coordination of settlement services and a lack of concerted effort between all participants in the continuum of services for francophone immigration to ensure that newcomers have an uninterrupted experience of support and services for successful integration. There's also an administrative slowness, which I've already mentioned.

In reality, then, what's missing is a pan-Canadian, systemic and collective approach to collecting, analyzing and sharing information relevant to coordination and co-operation between pre-departure, reception and settlement services, which limits the ability of francophone newcomers to take full advantage of reception and settlement services.

I'm going to present a few possible solutions. We recommend an integrated approach to facilitating access and referral to services for francophone newcomers, from pre-departure to arrival and settlement. We recommend strengthening data and information sharing among the various stakeholders involved in the continuum of services to increase the effectiveness of support offered to francophone newcomers. We recommend improving in-person support in immigrants' countries of origin. Finally, we recommend that more consular offices be opened in other French-speaking countries, especially in areas where the great distances between offices make it hard for people wanting to immigrate to Canada to access them.

To conclude—

- (0900)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Ngenzebuhoro. The five minutes are up. I want everyone to have a chance to speak, but you will have another opportunity when you respond to questions.

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

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard (Vice-President, International Talents and Foreign Investment, Québec International): Mr. Chair, Vice-Chairs, members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I would like to begin by thanking you for the interest you have shown in Québec International by agreeing to invite us to participate in the efforts toward increased francophone immigration to Canada. It is an honour for me to have the opportunity to discuss this subject with you.

As a regional economic development agency, Québec International promotes business growth, supports key clusters and attracts talent and investment to the area. In the current context of labour

scarcity in the province of Quebec, and especially in the National Capital and Chaudière-Appalaches regions where we operate, the agency is more than aware of the key role of people of immigrant backgrounds on our territory.

Last April, the unemployment rate was 1.7% in the Quebec City census metropolitan area, the lowest among the 47 main Canadian regions. Labour scarcity, as we can see, remains a very current challenge for entrepreneurs in the region. And yet fifteen years ago, in 2008, we could already see labour challenges starting to appear on the horizon, which prompted our organization to set up international recruitment initiatives and missions abroad. Over the years, talent attraction became one of the major mandates of our economic development agency.

In absolute numbers, the National Capital Region welcomed 5,377 newcomers in 2022, compared to 2,340 in 2021. This represents a 130% increase during the last year. We can see the same trend on the south shore of Quebec City. The Chaudière-Appalaches region welcomed over 1,200 immigrants in 2022. Over the past year, 13 of the 17 administrative regions in the province of Quebec reached their highest net international migration rate since at least 2021.

This performance illustrates a clear trend towards the regionalization of immigration in Quebec. It can be explained in part by international talent recruitment activities in a context of labour scarcity. This indicates that the number of positions on the job market continues to grow, but also that the demand for workers is increasing.

This situation therefore invites the organization to strengthen and pursue its efforts related to the recruitment of international workers and students. However, employers and educational establishments, just like the candidates we accompany, face many challenges linked to their international mobility project. Today, we'd like to give you a few examples.

Firstly, the rate of visa refusals from French-speaking African countries is a major concern, particularly for educational establishments. Secondly, there are abnormally long processing times for work permits, in excess of five months, in Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Togo and Tunisia.

Abroad, we also note that Canadian embassies sometimes find themselves in competition with Quebec to help attract French-speaking immigrants outside Quebec. In addition, local legal support services, in the form of individual consultations for temporary workers and their families in vulnerable situations, are not easily accessible.

Also, our new arrivals are regularly faced with waiting lists for access to francization. Access to francization prior to arrival would benefit from greater development, especially in non-French-speaking countries, such as those in Latin America, where there is a high potential for francization.

Finally, the inadequate alignment of administrative procedures between the two levels of government, Quebec and Canada, creates a great deal of confusion, particularly during regulatory changes.

I believe that these issues should be raised as part of this present consultation and brought to your attention, in order to encourage an increase in French-speaking immigration to Canada and more specifically to our region, that of Quebec.

In closing, I would once again like to thank you for listening.

I would be delighted to answer any questions you may have.

● (0905)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chouinard.

I see the third witness hasn't arrived yet. We'll start the question period anyway.

Ladies from the Centre francophone du Grand Toronto and Québec International...

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Excuse me, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: I'm listening, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: How will you divide the time when the third witness arrives? We receive the commissioner during the second hour. It's important for us to know whether we'll want to question the new witness or focus on the two witnesses we've just heard.

The Chair: For now, we're concentrating on those who are with us. As soon as the third witness arrives, we'll do his sound test and he'll join us.

Mr. Joël Godin: You will therefore interrupt the questioning of the witnesses.

The Chair: Yes, as soon as we get confirmation that he's logged in.

Ladies, the first round of questions will be six minutes for each political party.

Mr. Joël Godin, our first vice-chair, will begin the first round.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses who are with us this morning, namely Ms. Chouinard and Ms. Ngenzebuhoro.

My first question is for Ms. Chouinard, who represents Québec International, an important organization for the economy of the Quebec City region. I'm a member of Parliament from the Quebec City region, and I think it's important that you're here. Thank you very much.

Ms. Chouinard, from an economic standpoint, francophone immigration helps our companies solve their labour shortage problems.

Could you give us a summary of the negative repercussions of the lack of access to francophone immigration?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: I don't have a figure on how many companies are affected by this. Recently, we surveyed a large proportion of the companies we support. Over 80% of them said

that the shortage of personnel was an obstacle to their growth. In absolute numbers, I can't tell you how many.

Statistically, we can expect this labour shortage to have an impact on our economy and represent a brake on growth. This shortage may prevent some companies from meeting all demands. They tell us they have a full order book, are in a position to expand and have a host of business opportunities, but can't follow them up because of a lack of personnel.

The shortage has a real impact on the development of some companies, particularly in certain sectors.

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

I believe the last witness has arrived.

I'll resume my question later, but before I do, I'd like to check a figure with you. Is it 80% or 90% of companies that have a labour problem?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: Eighty per cent told us they have this problem.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin. You only took 2 minutes 17 seconds. I've stopped the stopwatch.

We now welcome Mr. Laberge, from the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine.

Mr. Laberge, we're going to take a few moments for you to do a sound test. Please say a few sentences.

Mr. Alain Laberge (Executive Director, Division scolaire franco-manitobaine): Good morning everyone, I'm sorry I'm late.

Can I begin my statement?

The Chair: No. We need to do a sound test first to make sure the interpreters can hear you well. Tell us about the weather in your area.

Mr. Alain Laberge: There are a lot of forest fires. Yesterday, there was a serious accident, it's very distressing. The bus was carrying about fifteen elderly people on their way to a casino; they died. It's a real tragedy.

The Chair: I'll interrupt you, Mr. Laberge. Your sound test is good. We'll also do a sound test for Ms. Ashton, who has just joined us.

There seem to be some technical difficulties. We'll come back to you, Ms. Ashton, when it's your turn to ask questions.

Mr. Laberge, you have a five firm minutes to make your address. Then we'll move on to the question and comment rounds.

● (0910)

Mr. Alain Laberge: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My name is Alain Laberge, and I'm executive director of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine. This is the only French-language school division in Manitoba, and it has nearly 6,000 students.

I want to acknowledge that we are on the lands covered by treaties 1 to 5 and on the homelands of Louis Riel and the Red River Métis.

I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Official Languages for allowing me to speak this morning about the opportunities and challenges arising from increased immigration and settlement needs issues, especially at the school level.

There are five important factors, the first being recruitment. The education sector, like many others, is no stranger to the phenomenon of labour scarcity and shortages. In this respect, recruitment is the first important element in the revitalization of a French-speaking minority environment. We can no longer be reactive; we have to be proactive. We believe that the government should allow professional cultural exchanges; international school cultural exchanges; the recognition of high school and university diplomas and credits; embassies and a government that promote and accelerate the process of granting Canadian citizenship; scholarships for school internships; transferability of credits; work scholarships in northern rural regions and a premium for distance from major centres, given that the cost of living is much higher in northern environments.

It must also be taken into consideration that, although education is a provincial jurisdiction, it is necessary, if not imperative, that the immigration, education and health sectors work together to facilitate a positive transition.

The second factor is reception. This is probably one of the most important factors in the success of a smooth integration. This one shouldn't be limited to the workplace welcome. Newcomers need to tour the village, get to know the active offer of French-language services and establish ties with other francophones in the area. We need to expand the francophone space.

The reception service offered is too often limited to a few weeks. In reality, a new family needs support and guidance in all areas of life in Manitoba or elsewhere in Canada. They need to apply for a health insurance card, find a family doctor and dentist, apply for a driver's licence, apply for a social insurance card and a library card, for example. You have to be able to do all this work in less than six months to guarantee a very successful reception.

The third factor is integration. To ensure successful integration, there is an obligation to support new arrivals. Like reception, integration takes time, depending on the family, location, community and many other factors. For children, it starts with the school, which sets up structures to verify all learning outcomes in relation to the Manitoba program. For parents, it means ensuring that they have access to federal and provincial services in the language of their choice.

The fourth factor is the language barrier. With the exception of New Brunswick, which is, in principle, a designated bilingual province, which I somewhat doubt, that said without irony, many French-speaking newcomers are under the impression that Canada is a bilingual country. They are therefore bitterly disappointed when they realize that they have little chance of living in French in Manitoba or anywhere else in Canada except Quebec. This is a real problem if we say that Canada is a country that promotes both lan-

guages. We lose many workers every year, simply because the majority of the Canadian population is unilingual English.

Once we've welcomed newcomers, we need to retain them. So the fifth factor is retention. One of the challenges facing school divisions in minority and rural areas is that, after a few years, people move to urban areas. So they're just passing through these small communities.

What can we do to improve the situation? We need to ensure that Canada works in partnership with its embassies to encourage economic immigration; that all our regions offer support services for families; that the federal government supports the provinces in funding community schools; that family members can quickly obtain permanent resident status; that Canada recognizes diplomas earned in foreign countries; that school divisions obtain funding to support newcomers and ensure they stay in rural areas; that these families can access a personal health care system as well as a home ownership plan.

It's important to adequately fund minority communities in order to counter assimilation. Economically and educationally, immigration would breathe new life into our economy while giving a new face to intercultural pedagogy.

I'd like to thank the Standing Committee on Official Languages once again for allowing the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine to provide some food for thought.

I am ready to answer any questions committee members may have.

• (0915)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Laberge. I know it's a little early for you in Manitoba. The same goes for Ms. Ashton, as well as Mr. Dalton, who is in Vancouver.

We'll resume the round of questions.

Mr. Godin, you have 3 minutes and 42 seconds left. You have the floor for more than three minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Chouinard, I'm continuing my discussion with you. You said earlier that, in the Quebec City region, 80% of the companies supported by Québec International are experiencing labour problems. You also mentioned that they may be missing the boat when it comes to economic development, as this leaves the field open to other competitors. We know that when it comes to the economy, when we leave room for our competitors, it's hard to take it back later.

Are you holding discussions with representatives from other regions? Is the situation similar elsewhere in Quebec? In fact, you probably also have discussions with people in charge of other organizations like yours in Canada.

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: In reality, this need for personnel is indeed widespread throughout Quebec. What's more, many of our counterparts in other economic development agencies in Quebec look to us to find out how we attract talent. We were pioneers when we sent out our first recruitment missions 15 years ago. We developed a methodology for accompanying companies. Seeing all the interest throughout Quebec in our ways of doing things—

Mr. Joël Godin: Forgive me for interrupting you, Ms. Chouinard, but my time is limited and I have more questions for you. Thank you.

In your statement you talked about the competition that exists between Canadian and Quebec embassies when Quebec takes steps. Can you tell us a little more about that?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: As part of our international initiatives, mainly in francophone and francophile countries, we sometimes notice that there is a lack of complementarity in the discourse of Canadian embassies. It would be better to talk about both Quebec and Canada, which have their own respective fields of expertise, of course, but in a complementary way. We need a line of communication that will help candidates better understand what we're talking about. Candidates don't always understand what's offered in Quebec and what's offered in French-speaking communities outside Quebec. It would therefore be in Canada's interest to encourage initiatives that are complementary or that don't take place at the same time.

We can already see that global competition is very fierce when it comes to attracting talent. So we need to pull together to attract more people to Canada, whether in Quebec or in francophone communities outside Quebec.

Mr. Joël Godin: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but would you dare say that Canadian embassies work for francophones outside Quebec and that Quebec must work alone?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: In fact, it's the Canada-Quebec Accord Relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens that gives Quebec the mandate to select immigrants. So it's completely legitimate and standardized.

That said, I'm not here to take away everyone's areas of jurisdiction. Rather, it's to say that we can act strategically, hand in hand, quite simply.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Ms. Chouinard. Indeed, I think we need to work in partnership.

You have to deal with companies on a daily basis. If you had a magic wand and could tell us, the legislators, what to do on the ground, concretely, to improve the efficiency and pragmatic side of francophone immigration, what would it be? What should we write into the laws?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: First, it would be to ensure more efficient processing of entry visa applications. It's really on the federal side that things need to improve.

The focus needs to be on French-speaking basins. In the context of today's study, that's really where efforts need to be made. I've named certain countries, but there are things that need to be improved there. Processing times are abnormally long, if Canada

compares itself to other non-French-speaking countries, and there's no reason why that should be the case.

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

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chouinard.

Thank you, Mr. Godin. I stretched out your time a little.

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

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Good morning, everyone.

I thank the witnesses for being with us this morning.

My first question is for the representative from Québec International.

Ms. Chouinard, what are the most effective measures for attracting French-speaking immigrants to Quebec companies?

Could you share with us the difficulties and gaps that exist?

● (0920)

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: What helps companies recruiting internationally is offering them support before, during and after recruitment. They need to be able to ask their questions, especially when it comes to identifying talent in line with their workforce needs. They also need to be accompanied through the immigration process and supported when people arrive in the Quebec City region.

Among the hindrances are the many regulatory changes that are made to immigration, as the immigration picture evolves, of course. For Quebec, this is all the more complex as reforms can vary from province to province. Companies therefore need even more support. There is a need to ensure closer alignment of administrative procedures specific to both levels of government.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

You said the company should receive greater support. Who should take on this responsibility?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: I think there need to be interveners in the field.

Québec International's mandate is given to it by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, and we're already seeing significant gains. We are able to deploy training, coaching and consulting programs. We are also able to surround ourselves with expert consultants. As an economic development agency, we have very close ties with employers. We're also a not-for-profit organization, which gives people confidence. I think we need to work with players on the ground, who are able to publicize both federal and provincial administrative procedures, not just those of one of the two parties.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

My next question is for representatives of the Centre francophone du Grand Toronto.

Concerning the arrival of francophone immigrants in official language minority communities, what are the greatest barriers or challenges these immigrants face in living in and participating in society?

Ms. Aissa Nauthoo (Vice-President, Centre francophone du grand Toronto): Thank you.

I'll answer the question, because I think Ms. Ngenzebuhoro is no longer online.

Mrs. Florence Ngenzebuhoro: My Internet access is very slow.

Thank you for the question, but I'll let Ms. Nauthoo answer it.

Ms. Aissa Nauthoo: Thank you, Ms. Ngenzebuhoro.

With regard to the needs of newcomers, I'll give some examples we've experienced in the field, as a provider of French-language services to newcomers in the Greater Toronto Area, for example.

We've noticed that the majority of French-speaking newcomers who are welcomed at Pearson Airport choose Toronto as their destination city to settle in. As we know, there is a housing crisis in Toronto, which is the same across the country. It's important to spread the word about the reality of the housing market.

When it comes to pre-departure services, the French-speaking African immigrants, in particular, that we welcome at the airport don't necessarily have all the information about the housing and job markets. As for economic integration, here in Toronto it's very difficult. It's not easy to live in a city like Toronto, if you...

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Ms. Nauthoo, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I don't have much speaking time left.

One of the barriers is the question of housing. Can you mention any other criteria? That would give us a better idea of the barriers and challenges immigrants face.

I don't want you to give us too many details in this regard, but it's very important to know them. Afterwards, other people will analyze them in greater depth.

Ms. Aissa Nauthoo: The obstacles they face include language problems. Many are highly qualified and speak French, but they don't master English well enough to function in both languages, for example in their work environment. There are also problems related to access to information when it comes to enrolling their children in a French-language school.

As I've already said, there's a problem in connection with housing. Many people who arrive in Canada have to stay in Airbnb accommodation, but they end up depleting their savings and find themselves without income and employment. What we've found, on the ground, is that there's not enough information about everything to do with settling in Canada.

• (0925)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: That's perfect, thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, do I have a little more time?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left, my friend.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: My next question is for the representative of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine.

Mr. Laberge, express entry is an application process for skilled immigrants, and this system is dedicated to immigration outside Quebec.

Can you tell me about the impact, on the ground, of this program?

The Chair: That's an excellent question, Mr. Iacono. Perhaps Mr. Laberge will have a chance to answer it later. I must divide the speaking time fairly among all members.

We will now begin the second round of questions.

Mr. Beaulieu, second vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, has the floor for six minutes.

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

Ms. Chouinard, you talked about competition with the federal government when it comes to recruiting French-speaking immigrants from outside Quebec.

Questions have already been put to the IRCC representatives who came to testify before our committee. They seemed to say that they had no mandate to help Quebec in any way, but that they are open to discussion.

In your opinion, have there ever been any meetings or any form of coordination in order to avoid mutual harm in terms of recruitment?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: It is very difficult for me to speak to this. I'm not part of the government apparatus. However, in the field, I have seen initiatives where we would have benefited from talking to each other more.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Temporary immigration is taking up more and more space. I don't know if you deal with temporary immigration. We know that there are problems between the federal government and the Quebec government in this area too. For example, to become a permanent resident, you have to pay the Quebec government. Then you have to pay twice as much after filling out the federal government forms.

Have you had any experiences in this regard?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: We notice that Quebec sometimes has an advantage over the other provinces and sometimes a disadvantage. It doesn't just go one way.

When there's a reform on one side, it becomes more complex. While the docking is going on with the other side, inconsistencies can sometimes appear.

In the past, we've seen benefits on the Quebec side with, for example, the list of professions eligible for simplified processing, which expands Quebec's ability to recruit more types of professionals without having to demonstrate a labour shortage. These are examples, but there have been others in the past.

There are good things and some that are not so good. It's all relative. What's most complex, for employers, is navigating between the two systems. A lot of the information on the Canadian side is ambiguous. We end up understanding that it's not for us, because we're in Quebec. That's what makes it complicated for employers.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We know that the federal government provides funding almost exclusively to English-language interest groups and organizations. In Quebec City, I think Voice of English-Speaking Québec is the one responsible for welcoming English-speaking immigrants and helping them integrate.

Are you aware of any organizations or programs that support French-speaking immigrants and receive funding from the federal government?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: Yes.

Quebec is well equipped for welcoming newcomers and helping them integrate. However, it's Quebec's ministry of immigration, francization and integration that oversees those services. The federal government transfers the funding to Quebec, and Quebec sets up the co-operation agreements with the organizations dedicated to welcoming and integrating newcomers.

Quebec is well served overall. That may not be quite as true in more remote areas, but in the national capital region, the Chaudière-Appalaches region and other such places, the service coverage is quite good.

• (0930)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As far as francophone integration is concerned, would you say it's better to recruit immigrants to regions with high concentrations of francophones or to try to regionalize immigration?

Ms. Marie-Josée Chouinard: In our case, the French fact is a requirement, even just for day-to-day life. French is the common language, the main language spoken by people in Quebec. In addition to recruiting people from French-speaking countries, we also focus a lot on recruiting people from francotropical countries because they engage more quickly in the French learning process. We've seen that people from Latin America tend to learn French quickly because they already speak a Latin language, Spanish or Portuguese. Africa, French-speaking Europe and Latin America represent great recruitment pools for Quebec.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Ms. Ngenzebuhoro, six million people live in the greater Toronto area, and only 80,000 have French as their first language. Less than 40,000 speak mostly French at home. Toronto doesn't have a French quarter. The community is spread out, and the assimilation rate among francophones in Toronto is more than 50%.

What do you think is the most effective way to get French-speaking immigrants integrated without losing their francophone identity, be it in the first or second generation?

The Chair: Please keep your answer under 15 seconds.

Mrs. Florence Ngenzebuhoro: I think it would be to bring them together in one community. Right now, we are working on developing a francophone village or district in the greater Toronto area. The answer would be to bring them together in one place where they can find their identity within the anglophone tidal wave of Toronto.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ngenzebuhoro.

Before we go to Ms. Ashton, who is joining us from Manitoba, we need to do a sound check.

Can you say a few words, Ms. Ashton?

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Good morning. I hope you can hear me fine. I'm very glad to be here today. Hopefully, the sound quality is good and I will be able to ask you my questions in just a moment.

The Chair: That's great, Ms. Ashton. You may go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you to the witnesses for joining us this morning to participate in this very important study.

It's very disappointing to hear that, although we all recognize that francophone immigration is essential to the country's future, the government hasn't found a way to support you in ensuring that families are properly welcomed so that they feel at home quickly. The government doesn't seem to realize that the country desperately needs their contribution.

The first issue I want to discuss is the education labour shortage, which is clearly impacting French-language learning outside Quebec and immersion programs. My first question is for Mr. Laberge, from the Franco-Manitoban school division.

Can you talk about the labour shortage and the huge demand from families who want their children to be educated in French?

How important is it for the federal government to prioritize recruiting and supporting those whom we want to come to Canada so they can teach our children and future generations?

Mr. Alain Laberge: Thank you, Ms. Ashton. I'm very glad you brought that up.

The lack of staff is huge. You hear a lot about the shortage of teachers, but we also need education aides and principals. If Quebec has more than 300 vacant positions right now, imagine how hard it is for a town like Thompson—which is a seven-hour drive from Winnipeg—to get teachers and staff to settle there and keep the community alive.

Let's be clear. Schools are somewhat the epicentre of French life in small northern communities. That's why we prioritized community schools. Some of their funding comes from the federal government, but it's not enough to support the transition of those families. We recruit them, but once they arrive in Thompson or St. Lazare, we can't turn our backs on them. We have to continue helping them integrate into the community, and that takes a lot of time and money. I know money isn't always our favourite topic, but at a certain point, attracting these families requires money.

What's more, there is little recognition of credentials. We also look for candidates in Africa and Latin America, but once they're in Canada, it usually takes a very long time for them to become permanent residents, so they often go elsewhere. The credential recognition process is a real maze. The five, six, seven or eight teachers we might be able to get can't be hired as teachers until their credentials are recognized in Canada. That usually means they have to go back to school, so supporting them in that process is also very important.

The other thing is we have to recruit people directly from those countries and not lie to them. Instead, we need to sell them on the natural beauty Manitoba has to offer. We can sell nature lovers and hikers on our fishing and hunting. We can sell them on northern, eastern and western Manitoba. To do that, though, we have to go to Africa to recruit those people and provide federal support for the whole permanent residency and visa process, so they can have a good life. Otherwise, they have to start at the bottom.

• (0935)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on early childhood education. The Franco-Manitoban school division has day cares. The demand for French-language day care spots is growing not just in Manitoba. The lack of staff is shocking.

Can you talk about that? What does the federal government need to do?

Mr. Alain Laberge: This year, we had to close one of our day cares in St-Georges for a few months because we didn't have the staff.

When you close a day care, you alienate part of the French-language education continuum. When children enter our school system, early childhood education plays a very important role in setting up their academic journeys, especially in a minority community. When there isn't a francophone day care, parents send their kids to an anglophone day care. That's where children socialize, meet English-speaking friends and form a new circle, and they end up doing their schooling in English.

As a minority group, we are much harder hit by the shortage than anglophones.

The federal government can help by making programs flexible so that people can keep working while they go after the credits they need. That is very important at a community level. Some of the people we hire have a grade 12 education and they want to take classes, but those classes are only given during the day. It makes no sense. People have to put food on the table, and that means they have to work. If they're working, they can't go to school in the day, so they need some flexibility.

The federal government could even make distance-learning classes available to help people from other countries get their credentials, so we could bring them on board right away.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Laberge.

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

We're running low on time, and the commissioner will be here for the second hour. What I'm going to do for the next round is give the Liberal and Conservative members three minutes, instead of five, and give the Bloc Québécois and NDP members a minute and a half. I'm trying to be fair.

Starting off the round is Gérard Deltell.

Go ahead, Mr. Deltell. You have three minutes.

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for being here.

I'm very proud and happy to be participating in this morning's meeting.

Mr. Chair, exactly four years ago today, Quebec passed its state secularism law, the much talked-about Bill 21. At the time, some argued that it would affect immigration because certain people might not feel comfortable coming to Quebec and would choose to settle somewhere else in Canada.

I'm going to ask Alain Laberge, the executive director of the Franco-Manitoban school division, this question first.

Mr. Laberge, in the past four years—so since Quebec brought in its state secularism law—have you seen an impact on francophone immigration? I'm talking about people from Maghreb, other parts of Africa or other parts of the world who chose to settle somewhere other than Quebec because of Bill 21?

• (0940)

Mr. Alain Laberge: I don't have any data that would indicate whether people chose Manitoba over Quebec. I would like to think people make informed decisions, but I can't really know what they're thinking. We focus a lot of our recruitment efforts on the places you mentioned, but we don't tell people about Bill 21 or anything like that. I'm not political. I'm an administrator.

We don't have those data. However, considering how many newcomers we hire, I would be very surprised if they were people who had left Quebec for Manitoba.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: It's less about people leaving Quebec and more about people who come to Canada and choose not to settle in Quebec because of Bill 21, as some had argued. In other words, they went somewhere else to speak French and live their lives in French, somewhere where there was no Bill 21.

Now I have the same question for Florence Ngenzebuhoro.

From what you've seen in the past four years, has Bill 21 had an impact on francophone immigration in Toronto?

Mrs. Florence Ngenzebuhoro: Thank you for your question.

I'm going to pass that question over to my colleague Aissa.

Ms. Aissa Nauthoo: Thank you.

We can refer to the figures and data collected on newcomers arriving at Pearson airport, as well as information from settlement services that handle newcomer referrals and needs assessments. I don't have those statistics either. I can tell you, however, that there has been a change in the home countries of certain newcomers who are received or served at the airport.

The data we have on newcomers from Maghreb countries, so countries where women wear a veil, and even some African countries, show a change when it comes to people settling in Toronto and Ottawa. For example, people from Lebanon and Morocco tended to settle in Ontario as opposed to other parts of Canada, including Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nauthoo.

Sorry to cut you off, but I have to enforce the time limits. I realize that three minutes isn't much time. You may have another opportunity to provide more information.

We now go to Darrell Samson for three minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Three minutes isn't even enough time to set up a question.

I don't have much time, Mr. Laberge. The chair is being strict this morning, so I will get right to my questions.

I had questions for you as well, Ms. Ngenzebuhoro, but I'll call you this afternoon instead.

Mrs. Florence Ngenzebuhoro: All right.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Mr. Laberge, it's always nice to see you. We spent a lot of years together as school board executive directors. Back then, I always had a team in charge of retention. When someone new to the area joined the school board, we would try to find them a buddy quickly, so they would put down roots in the community and not leave. That was one of our strategies.

I just want to make two very important points.

First, the express entry program gives priority to francophones, which is very important. It also gives priority to francophone skilled workers. You may want to look into that. I think school boards could really benefit.

Second, day cares are vital. You can't have French-language schools without francophone day cares. Otherwise, the French system will lose kids.

I'd appreciate it if you could comment quickly on those two points.

Mr. Alain Laberge: Thank you, Mr. Samson. Yes, it's been a while since we've seen each other. It's always nice to see you as well.

Day cares are vital. As I said earlier, we call it the cradle to the grave continuum, because learning is a lifelong pursuit. I think the expression cradle to the grave captures that well.

The other thing you mentioned was the express entry program, which also helps us recruit people. We do something similar to what you did in Nova Scotia. When newcomers to the province are sent out to rural areas, they often stay with a family for a few

months. The two families live together. The newcomers get to know the area and can usually fly on their own afterwards. Nevertheless, the host families need some support as well.

Mr. Darrell Samson: All right.

Mr. Laberge, what's your relationship with the francophone immigration recruitment agencies? In Nova Scotia, it wasn't great, but we built it up.

We have the Réseau de développement économique et d'employabilité, or RDEE, and the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse in my province.

What do you have in your province? Actually, it's not so much what you have that I'm interested in. It's more what your school division's relationship with agencies that recruit French-speaking immigrants is like. That relationship is key so that immigrants can do their schooling in French.

• (0945)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds to answer.

Mr. Alain Laberge: We work with the RDEE and Accueil francophone, which provide support to families once they are in our school system.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Laberge.

I know it's tight, but we now go to the Bloc Québécois for a minute and a half.

Over to you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I will try to be very quick.

My question is for you, Mr. Laberge.

What proportion of francophone immigrants have gone to small towns with a larger francophone community, which offer more opportunities to integrate and a lower likelihood of assimilation?

What percentage of immigrants choose the greater Winnipeg area, where only 25,000 of 750,000 people are francophone and the assimilation rate is above 60%?

Mr. Alain Laberge: The latest figures put the francophone immigration rate at 4%, and of that, at least 3.4% go straight to Winnipeg or what we call the Winnipeg belt. That leaves 0.6% of the 4% who make their way to host villages, which are mainly francophone villages that are growing, but it's a very small number.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The rate of language transfer to English or French is taken into account, then.

Mr. Alain Laberge: Absolutely.

There are so-called "homogeneous" families arriving, meaning that both parents speak French. However, we have a large wave of families that are increasingly heterogeneous and, for the most part, English is the language spoken at home.

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

Mr. Beaulieu, your time is up.

Ms. Ashton, you have a minute and a half.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'd like to heartily thank all the witnesses.

I'll give the last word to Mr. Laberge from the Manitoba community.

What final message would you like to give us?

What should the federal government do to ensure that it's working with you and with francophone communities outside Quebec in order to find solutions to the labour shortage and meet the needs of our schools and day cares?

What would you like to tell us in your closing remarks?

Mr. Alain Laberge: To conclude, I'd like to say that it's important to work together. We realize that education plays a huge role, but without the other areas under federal jurisdiction, like health-care or immigration, it's not enough. The key is to work together.

Also, programs should promote the regions. Right now, there isn't really a program that guarantees you an excellent quality of life if you're sent to Saint-Lazare, Thompson or elsewhere. There's no emphasis on fostering that kind of thing, so everyone goes to Winnipeg.

As I said earlier, we work very closely with Accueil francophone, to set up what we call "welcoming cities". We do bus tours with newcomers, to show them these villages. We've done that in seven or eight villages. We're also working with local mayors and members of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly to ensure that we have French-speaking communities where you can practise a sport or leisure activity, among other things, in French. If we go to Thompson and rely only on the school for speaking French, it won't work. We—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Laberge. I am sorry to interrupt you, but your time is up.

Ms. Ashton, thank you.

Witnesses, Mr. Samson made a comment about the chair being strict, but I want everyone to be able to ask their questions and hear the witnesses' answers. Those are the rules of the game; I'm sorry. Time is a little short, because the Commissioner of Official Languages is about to speak during the second hour of the meeting.

That said, Ms. Ngenzebuhoro, Ms. Nauthoo, Ms. Chouinard and Mr. Laberge, if you have any further information that might enlighten us, please feel free to submit it in writing to our clerk. I would have asked you many questions myself.

I'd like to thank you for your comments, explanations, knowledge and patience.

We will now suspend momentarily, to give the commissioner time to settle in.

Witnesses, you may remain online to hear testimony from the Commissioner of Official Languages.

I hereby suspend the meeting.

● (0950)

(Pause)

● (0950)

The Chair: Dear friends, we will now hear from the Commissioner of Official Languages and officials from the Office of the Commissioner in connection with the study on increasing francophone immigration to Canada and with the annual report 2022-23 of the Commissioner of Official Languages referred to the committee on Tuesday, May 30, 2023.

I'd now like to welcome some witnesses we receive from time to time. We're always delighted to see them again. So I'd like to welcome Mr. Raymond Th  berge, Commissioner of Official Languages; Mr. Pierre Leduc, assistant commissioner, policy and communications branch; Ms. Pascale Gigu  re, general counsel, legal affairs branch; and Ms. Isabelle Gervais, assistant commissioner, compliance assurance branch.

Mr. Th  berge, you're a regular guest of the committee. I'll let you get the ball rolling with a five-minute presentation.

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

Mr. Chair, honourable members of the committee, good morning.

I'd like to acknowledge that the lands on which we are gathered are part of the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg people, an indigenous people of the Ottawa Valley.

I'm particularly pleased to be with you today, the day after Bill C-13 was adopted in the Senate at third reading. We will soon begin a new chapter in the history of official languages, and I'm delighted to be a part of that.

I'll start with my recent annual report, if I may. After more than two years of the pandemic, Canadians have finally been able to return to a certain degree of normalcy and resume activities that were put on hold due to pandemic-related health restrictions. This normalcy has, however, highlighted official language issues that I've repeatedly raised in the past but that are still very much present.

● (0955)

[English]

Again this year, I received a significant number of complaints from the travelling public. In 2023, there are no more excuses for federal institutions that provide services to the travelling public. It's long past time for them to take strong measures to ensure they provide their services in both official languages.

I have therefore recommended in my annual report that the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Transport develop tools and guidelines related to the language obligations of airport authorities and share them with the airport authorities by March 31, 2024. I've also recommended that the Minister of Transport require airport authorities to submit a plan by June 30, 2025, on how they will fulfill their language obligations to the public.

Another ongoing issue is the lack of respect for the language rights of federal public servants. With the increased presence of technology and the implementation of hybrid work models, our federal public service is undergoing a major transformation. However, we can't let the language rights of public servants fall by the wayside.

I've therefore urged the leaders of federal institutions to ensure that, in regions designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes, work environments are conducive to the effective use of both official languages.

[*Translation*]

In my annual report, I've recommended that by the end of June 2025, the President of the Treasury Board, the Minister of Official Languages and the Clerk of the Privy Council work together both to define concrete ways to highlight the role of official languages in the federal public service and to measure the actual capacity of federal public servants to work in the official language of their choice. I've also recommended that the President of the Treasury Board implement her three-year action plan by June 2025 at the latest, to increase compliance with the requirement to objectively establish the language designations of positions in the federal public service.

Whereas we will soon be able to rely on a modernized Official Languages Act, it is crucial that we once again prioritize our official languages and give them the distinct importance they deserve on an ongoing basis.

Let me now turn to the second reason I'm here before you today: francophone immigration to Canada.

[*English*]

As you know, the federal government announced a few months ago that, for the first time in 20 years, it reached its target of 4.4% francophone immigration to French linguistic minority communities. This is a step in the right direction, but we will need to aim for a more ambitious target. At the current rate, the demographic weight of French speakers will continue to decline outside of Quebec.

Our communities could benefit greatly from increased francophone immigration at a time when many fields, such as health care and education, are suffering from labour shortages. We need to ensure that, as soon as they arrive in Canada, French-speaking newcomers are provided with the services they need to integrate fully into our francophone minority communities, as well as any other services they require. It's one thing to welcome them to the country, but we also need to help them thrive in Canadian society.

Francophone newcomers need to see that there's a viable future in French for them in Canada.

[*Translation*]

I strongly believe that both of our official languages enrich the regions where they're spoken and, in practical terms, offer new social, cultural and economic opportunities. This is why it's so important to ensure effective integration services so that newcomers can contribute to the vitality and development of francophone minority communities.

Thank you for your attention.

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

The Chair: You spoke for 4.59 minutes, you could not have been more accurate. Thank you, Commissioner.

Each party will have six minutes.

We begin with Mr. Dalton from British Columbia. There's a three-hour time difference.

You have the floor for six minutes.

● (1000)

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Good morning, everyone.

Thank you very much, Commissioner.

In your opening remarks, you said the following:

[*English*]

I've therefore urged the leaders of federal institutions to ensure that, in regions designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes, work environments are conducive to the effective use of both official languages.

Later, you mentioned the actual capacity of federal public servants to work in the official language of their choice.

[*Translation*]

My questions are fairly straightforward.

Which federal institutions are those? Which regions are designated bilingual to work—

The Chair: We've lost the connection with Mr. Dalton. I will reserve the remainder of his time; he used one minute.

Ms. Lalonde, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Monsieur Thériault, it's a pleasure to see you again and an honour to have had the opportunity to hear your testimony.

You referred to the historic moment that occurred last night, when the Senate passed Bill C-13, which was highly anticipated by many of us in French Canada.

As you know, in this bill, we added the obligation to have a francophone immigration policy with targets and objectives.

Could you tell us about the potential repercussions of this obligation and, perhaps, offer some suggestions?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Francophone immigration is crucial to the development of our official language minority communities. Indeed, according to statistics, we see that the relative weight of francophone communities is decreasing compared to that of the majority. Developing a francophone immigration strategy will now be an obligation enshrined in law, which is important.

In the Action Plan for Official Languages 2023-28, there is funding for francophone immigration. So there's a link between the action plan and certain elements of the bill. This is very important. Indeed, during certain discussions, it was said that if there were no resources to implement this policy, it wouldn't get us very far.

On the other hand, though I'm no expert on the subject, I can see that the immigration issue is incredibly complex. There are many immigration categories in Canada, which creates a huge potential pool of immigration candidates, whether they be economic immigrants, refugees, family-sponsored immigrants, temporary workers or foreign students.

One thing is certain, the obligation enshrined in the law demonstrates the government's desire to develop a francophone immigration policy. I would like to see a holistic immigration strategy, distinct from a global immigration policy, that specifically addresses the immigration needs of minority language communities.

I think there are many ways in which Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada can help. I would also point out that this department has enormous discretionary power to choose who is admitted to Canada as an immigrant.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much.

You referred to tangible solutions, specific points. In particular, you talked about the funding for francophone immigration, which I consider historic, \$4.1 billion in our Action Plan for Official Languages 2023-28, and the importance of concrete investment in francophone immigration.

Would you be able to suggest any avenues for the committee to pursue? You know the broad strokes, but would you have any measures to recommend in terms of these new investments for francophone immigration? I know you don't consider yourself an expert on the subject, but I think you have a solid overview of the day-to-day realities and main concerns.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on concrete solutions we could bring to this issue.

• (1005)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: First of all, I see immigration as a continuum, starting with the selection of candidates and ending with the stage of integration, or settlement, of these people on the ground. It's a very lengthy process.

We need to ensure, for example, that our organizations providing immigrants with settlement services have enough resources to properly support newcomers in their new environment.

One of the key elements is housing. I recently attended a conference on immigration. The issue that kept coming up was housing. People are wondering where they're going to house these new ar-

rivals and how they're going to give them the tools they need to integrate linguistically into the workplace.

If we can't integrate them into our communities by offering this type of program, immigrants may leave these communities and settle elsewhere. We've often seen this in many of our regions.

One thing that's important is that people who move here are looking for a community. They don't want to feel alone in another community. So it's important to have a critical mass of immigrants in our communities.

Also, I think there's the whole issue of employability and recognition of prior learning. I recently read that immigrants' diplomas aren't always recognized and that they work in fields that are completely unrelated to their own specialty.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Mrs. Lalonde.

Mr. Beaulieu will now ask questions.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you for your testimony.

I'm going to pick up the pass. You say that it's important people live in a francophone community. However, we're seeing that immigration isn't at all regionalized. There are no targets. Couldn't that undermine the effective recruitment and integration of francophone immigrants outside Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I've noticed that some provinces are setting targets. For example, New Brunswick is targeting a francophone immigration rate of 30% to strike a balance. Manitoba has already targeted 7%. In Ontario, I believe it's 5%. I feel we need to set targets.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Don't you think that a francophone African immigrant on the Acadian peninsula is more likely to integrate than a francophone immigrant in a part of New Brunswick where very little French is spoken?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It comes down to the importance of settlement services in place for newcomers. If they end up in a community where there are no services available to support them, they'll probably leave that community.

By the way, I attended a meeting with new immigrants to Canada. They told me that immigration is a personal life project for them and that when they leave their country, they do it to start a new life. They therefore choose a place where they can be sure they can live that new life.

Immigration is therefore a very personal choice. Immigrants don't choose based on the percentage of francophones in a region, whether it's 5% or 32%. For them, it's a personal life project.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: However, if they find themselves in an environment that doesn't offer services in French, I don't think they will continue to operate in French.

I've heard some criticism of your report on a few occasions. It was about the fact that you don't specify whether the complaints come from francophones who have trouble obtaining services in French or from anglophones who have trouble obtaining services in English.

Is there any data on that?

• (1010)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: What I can tell you is that, for the most part, there's a lack of services in French for francophones.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: There have been complaints about this within the federal public service in Quebec. Are they mainly francophones who are having trouble working in French?

Mrs. Isabelle Gervais (Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Assurance Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): If your question is whether the complaints of federal public servants in Quebec concern the lack of services in French, I don't believe that is the case.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It's more anglophones who make such complaints. I once saw in a survey that a lot of anglophones complained about not being able to obtain enough federal services in English. However, we know that 68% of federal public service positions in Quebec require knowledge of English.

What could be done to provide more services in English?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It happens in both languages. Sometimes, in staff meetings outside Quebec, for example, they say "hello/*bonjour*" and "agenda/*ordre du jour*", but the meeting is held in English. There could be a similar situation in Quebec. A Quebec official told me that working in French was not a problem for them, except when they were dealing with federal staff in Ottawa. It would be the same situation: The presentation would begin with "hello/*bonjour*", but the rest would take place in only one language.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: On another topic, in terms of francophone immigration, you say that 4.4% is not enough and that it will even lead to a certain decline in francophone minority communities.

In your opinion, what would be an acceptable objective? How could we ensure that these people don't add to the assimilation rate of all francophones outside Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The target should be doubled at least. The F  d  ration des communaut  s francophones et acadienne du Canada, or FCFA, says 12%. I believe we need to do a real demographic analysis to determine the impact of that target. We know the consequences of not meeting the target, which would include a shortfall of 75,000 people. The consequences would also be felt over several decades.

Perhaps we should do a better analysis to determine what that target is.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In other words, if the target doesn't change, the decline will continue to accelerate.

Is that correct?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Absolutely.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: With regard to Quebec, from what we've seen, it would seem that under the action plan for official languages 2023-2028, all the funding goes to English.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In your opinion, Mr. Th  berge, should anything change in the future or will English continue to be massively reinforced?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I feel the action plan was developed based on consultations that took place outside Quebec, with francophone communities outside Quebec and the anglophone community in Quebec. The purpose of the Official Languages Act and the action plan is to support official language minority communities on both sides.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: However, they don't support French in Quebec.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The purpose of the action plan is to support official language minority communities on both sides.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Dalton, we're told that you're back with us. You had five minutes left. The floor is yours.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

With respect to federal agencies, Mr. Th  berge, could you give us a few examples? Does that also include the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The RCMP is a federal agency subject to the Official Languages Act. We still receive a good number of complaints related to the RCMP.

Mr. Marc Dalton: How about, for example, transportation, airports?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: There are 230 federal agencies subject to the Official Languages Act. I can't name them all.

Mr. Marc Dalton: As for the designated bilingual regions, are they the big cities?

Could you tell us what the bilingual regions are, particularly in British Columbia?

• (1015)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Actually, there are no designated bilingual regions in British Columbia. They are mainly the National Capital Region, Greater Montreal and part of New Brunswick. There are none in the west.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I just wanted to clarify that, since you talked about the need to determine the effective use of a language, whether it be French or English. Could you tell me if this also applies to federal agencies in British Columbia?

I know that federal agencies are required to provide services in French to francophones, but I'd like to know whether francophone workers also have the right to speak their language across Canada.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: A distinction must be made between federal agencies subject to the act, which must provide services in both official languages, and regions designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes. It's not the same thing.

What we'd like is for all public servants, regardless of where they are, to be able to work in the official language of their choice. We're seeing a decline in the use of French in the workplace across Canada. The question of whether they can use the language of their choice in writing was even removed from the survey of francophone public servants. So there's no satisfactory way to measure the use of French. As I've already said, it's considered a somewhat secondary language in the workplace. There's a tremendous amount of work to be done in that regard.

We'd like to ensure that all public servants are able to work in the official language of their choice. One day, service offices should also offer the same level of service in French as those located in designated bilingual regions. A 1977 circular shows where services are provided. The demographics of the country have totally changed since 1977.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay.

I mainly have a western perspective. People really want to reinforce French here in British Columbia. Hundreds of thousands of students went to French primary and secondary school to learn and use the language. However, it's always a challenge for this community to develop, even though all those students have followed that path.

Here, especially in Vancouver, other languages are widely spoken, such as Mandarin, Tagalog and Punjabi. Hundreds of thousands of people speak them.

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

Mr. Marc Dalton: Mr. Th  berge, you said that 4.4% was not enough. What would be a sufficient percentage for francophone immigration outside Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Yes, 4.4% is not enough. We should at least double that target. Others are talking about 12% or more as a way to get things back on track.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

The Chair: I feel sorry for your family, Mr. Dalton. Given the three-hour time difference for you in British Columbia, I hope that the Standing Committee on Official Languages doesn't disrupt the Dalton family's sleep or wake-up time.

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

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

Thank you for being with us this morning, Commissioner.

You talked about immigration. I know you have a background in post-secondary education. So you're aware of the labour shortage in French-language education, particularly in immersion programs. I'm talking about those outside Quebec, obviously.

We just heard from the representative of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine and from other organizations that we need a clear plan not only to recruit teachers and people who want to work in education, but also to ensure that we give them a proper welcome so that they'll want to stay and they'll have the support they need.

Can you tell us how important it is for the federal government to have a strategy focused on education outside Quebec and to prioritize recruiting, welcoming and supporting people in that field?

• (1020)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Thank you for the question.

Earlier, I talked about the labour shortage in education and health care. A number of provinces have recruited a lot of nurses from abroad, but they don't seem to be doing the same thing to find teachers. It's crucial that we provide guidance to these individuals, given the whole cultural aspect of what teachers do. If we want to meet the educational needs of the communities, we have no choice but to recruit people from abroad.

We can't expect someone who has just arrived to be able to just walk into a classroom right away. We have to work with the faculties of education and the professional associations on prior learning recognition, which is often a challenge. We should even create an education corridor across Canada to facilitate recruitment of people in this field.

There's a huge shortage of early childhood instructors who teach French or French as a second language. That's where it all begins. If we can do it in health care, why can't we do it in education? We have to wonder why.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

With regard to early childhood, can you tell us a little more about the need for a strategy or special attention in this area outside Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Early childhood services are not offered in the official language of choice—I'm talking about French here. If we want to encourage people to learn a language in a minority situation, we need to start as early as possible. We also have to take into account the fact that there are a huge number of exogamous or mixed couples. We absolutely have to maximize the time they spend in a French environment before they start school, at the preschool level.

When there was a shortage of teachers in the past, a number of people who worked in the early childhood stream were requalified to become teachers. So the preschool centres were emptied out. As I just said, with respect to teachers, we have to find a way to go get people where they are. In my opinion, we should have a corridor across the country to recruit people able to work in the early childhood stream. Our early childhood efforts will pay off when kids start school.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

I'd now like to turn briefly to Air Canada. You talked about the complaints that had been filed with the Office of the Commissioner. Last night, the Senate passed Bill C-13. We hope that you will soon have new powers under the act with respect to Air Canada.

Do you plan to levy administrative monetary penalties on Air Canada if it fails to meet its language-related responsibilities?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The administrative monetary penalty regime will not come into force immediately upon royal assent. There will have to be an order in council, followed by regulations. This is not a power that I will be able to use right away. The other mechanisms in the bill will also be very useful for dealing with entities like Air Canada, whether for compliance agreements or orders. The implementation of administrative monetary penalties will follow the implementation of an order in council and the adoption of regulations.

• (1025)

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

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

The next round will be five minutes for the Conservatives and the Liberals.

[English]

The floor is yours for five minutes, Ms. Gladu.

[Translation]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

Mr. Th  berge, I'm going to come back to the issue of francophone immigration targets. I support your recommendation to double the target, but what are the obstacles to achieving it?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We've seen a number of barriers to achieving that target in the past.

First, we must ensure that we recruit candidates where there are significant francophone populations. In the past, I think we focused on certain European regions, but I often say that the future of French lies in Africa, and that we have to recruit from the francophone pools. There is no doubt about that. IRCC is now focused on Cameroon, but when I was president of the Universit   de Moncton, we welcomed a lot of students from C  te d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal. So we have to go where there are pools of potential candidates.

Second, we need to make the process more efficient and faster. We also have to look at the role or place of foreign students who are recruited. We hear some things about the recruitment of franco-

phone foreign students compared to anglophone foreign students. We have to determine their role in the entire immigration process.

Then there's the issue of temporary workers, which is another potential pool. When we recruit people, regardless of the avenue chosen, we must not forget the language aspect. It is important to remember that the 4.4% target refers to permanent residents. There are a number of other sources of immigration to Canada. As I said at the outset, it's very complex, and there are a lot of possibilities in the system.

Of course, there is also the issue of integration. Settlement services have been put in place, and we have to make sure that people have the resources they need to do their job. Are future immigrants aware of the existence of francophone communities outside Quebec? That's the first question. So we have to do a better job of informing people, but we especially have to go where potential candidates can be found.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: That's great. Thank you.

I'll let my colleague Mrs. Vien ask the next question.

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—L  vis, CPC): Thank you very much to my colleague.

Good morning, everyone.

Mr. Commissioner, I'd like to ask you two brief questions.

Earlier, you mentioned that roughly 230 organizations were subject to the Official Languages Act, if I understood correctly. Which of these organizations receives the most complaints?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think it's Air Canada.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: That leads me to my second question.

I've noticed lately that when staff greet passengers on a plane, they welcome them and say they are happy and delighted to be able to offer them bilingual service.

How do you take that announcement when you travel by plane, Mr. Th  berge? How should it be understood?

• (1030)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I take it with much anticipation. I wonder if that will translate into an active offer of service in both official languages. For example, if we are offered a glass of juice, are they going to say "would you like" and "*est-ce que vous voulez*"? That's what we call an active offer.

Then, when instructions are given regarding emergency exits, are they given in both official languages? Is there an active offer there as well? That's often what's missing. An announcement is made and, subsequently, when we communicate individually with passengers, there is no active offer of service.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: That's serious.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: I find it rather deplorable that they announce that “today” they can serve you in both languages. That's what I want to point out. It implies that they can serve you in both languages today, but that they don't know about tomorrow. What do you think about that?

The Chair: That's a good question. Unfortunately, we're out of time, Mrs. Vien.

Mr. Commissioner, you'll be able to come back to this later.

The next five minutes go to Darrell Samson.

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

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

I have lots of questions.

Mr. Commissioner, I won't do this every day, but I'll allow you to take 30 seconds of my time, but only 30 seconds, to respond to my Conservative friend.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Okay, but that's very short.

I think the answer is quite simple. It shouldn't be specified that services are offered in both official languages today, since that is part of the norm. That's what's normal.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Okay, thank you. You did that very well.

I certainly want to take the opportunity to thank you and your team for the work you've done and continue to do. I know your testimony on Bill C-13 has been very helpful to us. Finally, here we are, and my colleague asked about the additional powers and tools you have. We're not going to get into that now.

As for the designation of regions, I believe that Isle Madame, a small island of 3,500 people, should be designated a francophone island, because there are 98% francophones there. I throw that in as a little joke, if you will.

There are two important things I want to discuss. As president of the Universit   de Moncton, you told us that you have welcomed a lot of immigrants. If I may say so, there are many francophone universities, especially outside Quebec, that recruit a lot of francophone immigrants.

Is there an action plan to integrate them? Now, with the express entry program and all the help we give to people to get their permanent residency, are we really working to keep these people in Canada?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think it varies from region to region and from university to university. Obviously, if we want to retain international students with a view to granting them permanent residency, the process has to be started as soon as they arrive, not in their fourth year of study. Contact with the communities needs to be established in their first year of study. However, that's not always the case. What's more, for a very large number of francophone post-secondary institutions in minority communities, international students represent an extremely important source of funding. Clearly, the pool is there.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, there's enormous potential, and perhaps we should focus our energies on those cases, from one end of Canada to the other.

You talked about an early childhood education corridor and the shortage of workers in education, as well as in health, for that matter. Can you tell us more about that? I think that's very important.

I know that, as the superintendent of school boards in Nova Scotia, I doubled my student population in less than a dozen years, simply by introducing an early childhood program in the schools. This program enabled people to integrate in terms of language, culture, and so on. It's incredible.

What can you tell us about that?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Obviously, if we want to increase the student population in the school system, we have to start with early childhood, before children go to school. We have to ensure that children have a sufficient command of the minority language to be able to go to school. It's a choice that parents make based on available resources. If there aren't any resources dedicated to early childhood, there's a very strong possibility that they won't enrol their child in kindergarten in French, because they'll tell themselves that the child isn't ready or aren't able to go there. So the sooner you start thinking about it, the better.

We're aware of that. We're well aware of the role of early childhood. However, we have to find human resources. Let me repeat that, at one point, we took everyone who worked in early childhood and gave them a teaching certificate, because there's a shortage of francophone education workers. The corridor I'm talking about has to extend right across the country. Whether it's in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta or British Columbia, it doesn't matter; we have to find a way to feed that corridor.

I think IRCC could certainly develop specific programs to meet those demands.

• (1035)

Mr. Darrell Samson: In addition to meeting the integration needs in terms of language and culture, we're also looking at the end product, which is to improve the quality of education. So it's really very important not only to integrate these people, but also to offer them quality education in French.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The sooner a person takes ownership of the cultural elements of a community, the more quickly they will integrate into it and feel that they belong to it.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Mr. Commissioner, once again, thank you for your work.

What a great day for Bill C-13! I'm convinced that young children now and in the future will be able to benefit from it for years to come. What I like most about Bill C-13 is that we'll be able to improve the act in 10 years. That's an important key element.

Even though part of the census was dropped, the data we received last year is correct for the next decade. We can show—

The Chair: Thank you for your comments, Mr. Samson, but you only had 10 seconds to make them.

We will now go to Mr. Beaulieu and Ms. Ashton.

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

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

Mr. Commissioner, do you think that maintaining the demographic weight of francophones who primarily use French at home is one of the objectives of the Official Languages Act?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Let's look at part VII of the act. In terms of immigration, if we want not only to maintain, but also to re-establish the traditional demographic weight at a rate of 6.1% or 6.2%, it's clear that we have to maintain the concept of mother tongue. I think that part VII of the act gives us the means to do that.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do you consider that the language spoken at home is also a valid indicator?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The language spoken at home is a very complex indicator. It depends on where you live and who you are. Are you an immigrant or a native speaker of French? Are you an exogamous couple? The language spoken at home is one indicator among many.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In Quebec, we take into account all the indicators, which generally all point in the same direction. For example, in the 2001 census, Statistics Canada data show that there is a decline in terms of language spoken at home or mother tongue, among other things. In fact, the decline is everywhere. The direction is almost always the same, but there are small differences between the indicators.

There is one important issue that is not often discussed. According to the data on language spoken at home, 33% of newcomers, immigrants, use French. According to the new indicator on potential demand, the percentage is much higher. To maintain the demographic weight of francophones in Quebec at its current level, 90% of newcomers would have to adopt the French language.

Since the federal government uses an indicator that includes 33% or more of immigrants to Quebec, isn't the federal government working to reduce the number of francophones in Quebec?

The Chair: Mr. Th  berge, you have less than five seconds to answer the question.

• (1040)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The agreement between Quebec and Canada must meet Quebec's needs.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Ms. Ashton, the floor is now yours for two and a half minutes.

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

I'd like to come back to Air Canada.

Commissioner, do you think that the power to impose administrative monetary penalties on certain entities, as indicated in

Bill C-13, will help ensure that entities like Air Canada will provide more comprehensive French-language services?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I would venture to guess that the imposition of administrative monetary penalties is an incentive to improve compliance with the act. It's more than that. I feel that Air Canada really needs to develop a culture that values official languages, particularly French. It's an interesting tool, but I'd also like to be able to develop compliance agreements with Air Canada, to issue orders and to see if, in the end, sanctions are really necessary. For the moment, we're a long way from that.

The Chair: You still have one minute.

Ms. Niki Ashton: When it comes to public services, we're talking about different things.

Can you hear me?

The Chair: We can hear you fine.

Ms. Niki Ashton: You talked about French in public services. Obviously, I'm talking about immigration.

Should we promote French more in public services in order to recruit, welcome and support French-speaking immigrants? Will investing in public services in French help improve support for the French-speaking immigrants we want to welcome?

The Chair: I'll let you answer very quickly.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: If I understood the question correctly, it's clear that at all times and as far as possible, we need to support people's language development and skills. If people are not able to use their second language or their mother tongue, there will certainly be a decline of the language in the community.

That said, I'm not sure I understood your question.

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's all the time you had, Ms. Ashton. I'm sorry about that.

Thank you, Commissioner.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

The Chair: There is very little time left to do a round with all the political parties.

As chair, I would like to ask you the following question.

Bill C-13 will be receiving royal assent shortly. How is the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages preparing for what's to come, with this new modernized act and this new feather in the cap of the commissioner and his office?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Over a year ago, we set up a special working group to examine the impact of the new powers to be granted to the Office of the Commissioner. This group examined what these new powers will mean for our resources, our organizational structure, our relations with the communities, and so on.

We are currently working on a deployment plan. As soon as the bill receives royal assent, we will ask the Treasury Board for funding to implement it. This will be followed by a second grant application to maintain it.

One thing is certain: we will need resources that we don't have at present, for example to carry out mediation. At the moment, we don't do mediation. Our organization will become much more litigious and, as a result, we will need lawyers, unfortunately.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Why do you say “unfortunately”?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We're getting ready. I hope that when Parliament reconvenes in the fall, we will have the opportunity to present our new plan to you.

The Chair: In any case, we're looking forward to it. This modernization has been long overdue. I know that you have been preparing for it. We can't wait to see the final result.

Mr. Th  berge, Mr. Leduc, Mr. Gigu  re and Ms. Gervais, thank you for your time today.

As I said earlier, I've brought in the heavy artillery so that we can adjourn the meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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