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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (0820)

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to welcome everyone attending in person or by videoconference to meeting number 87 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 20, 2023, the committee is meeting to resume its study on the economic development of official language minority communities.

Normally, I give instructions for those on videoconference, but since we are now used to applications like Zoom or Teams, I will skip that. However, I would like to remind you to mute your microphone when you are not speaking, and to unmute it when I give you the floor.

In accordance with our routine motion concerning sound checks, I wish to inform the committee that all witnesses have completed the required tests in advance of the meeting.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses today. As an individual, we have Patrick Dupuis. From the Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick—one of the most beautiful provinces, of course—we have president and chief executive officer Gaëtan Thomas.

To our guests, you have five minutes each for your opening remarks. Then we'll go to an interactive exchange of questions and answers, and I'll be firm on the time to allow everybody to ask questions.

Mr. Dupuis, we'll start with you.

Mr. Patrick Dupuis (As an Individual): Good morning.

My name is Patrick Dupuis and I own a cheese factory in Alberta. We've been in business since 2015. We went through a lot of ups and downs, as everyone did, including the pandemic and the recession and everything else that went along with that. During that time, we were able to grow our business and expand it a little more into the Alberta market and into western Canada.

Today, I want to talk to you about the resources available to increase the economic potential of francophone businesses and owners in rural Alberta. As I said, we've been in business for eight years. It's a small family business and there are only five of us, including myself and my daughter, who is about to take over the business.

That's pretty much what I have to say. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dupuis. I think it's pretty early where you are.

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: Yes, it's 6:21 a.m.

The Chair: Thank you for participating in this exercise.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Thomas.

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas (President and Chief Executive Officer, Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick): Good morning.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning on behalf of the Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick.

As president and CEO of the Conseil, I represent 600 members, including all francophone municipalities in New Brunswick and, of course, the Université de Moncton, the Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick, as well as all the drivers of economic development.

I would like to begin by putting you in context. Often, francophone minority communities in the regions, especially rural ones, find themselves at a disadvantage compared to urban centres. Policies in the three urban centres of Moncton, Fredericton and Saint John tend to centralize more and more. Right now, only two people speak French in the New Brunswick cabinet. Because of this lack of representation, decisions on how to manage and distribute services are becoming more and more centralized.

We're really moving away from the concept of equal opportunity for all, the program of social reforms that was so well defined and implemented in the 1960s by the former premier of New Brunswick Louis J. Robichaud. This concept made bilingualism an economic strength in New Brunswick, and it's an advantage that some anglophones in the province are still unable to recognize.

People in rural areas are increasingly moving to urban centres for a number of reasons, including employment opportunities and high-speed Internet access. At least we still have housing, even if it's not always affordable. On the other hand, as the population declines in the northern part of the province, the gross domestic product of that region declines to the benefit of southern New Brunswick, but this is not new money for the province. As a result, some northern schools are closing, and new schools are being built for more than what they cost in the past. That's not to mention all the problems that this causes in urban centres, which sometimes grow too fast. This is particularly the case in Moncton, where we see homelessness, crime, poverty, mental health problems, and so on.

In terms of the market, the nature of capitalism is such that real estate developers are building mostly in urban settings, which makes it more profitable for them. However, we have a labour shortage, and it's much more difficult to attract francophone immigrants to the regions. It's always been that way.

Uniform government policy does not promote regional economic development, and the situation is even worse for rural regions.

Immigration is essential if we want our regions to survive. As a result, I would like to talk a little about the policy recently announced by the Minister of Immigration, which provides for changes that don't take into consideration the specific immigration challenges francophone minority communities face. I hope that the Standing Committee on Official Languages will work hard to ensure that the obligations in the new version of the Official Languages Act that came out of Bill C-13 will be met. I trust in Mr. Arseneault, who has committed to doing everything in his power to avoid putting us at a disadvantage.

However, we're still concerned, because we are in the midst of dealing with international students who want to come and study in New Brunswick and we've already invited them to do so. However, the process is long and complex, and we're quite concerned about it. For example, the Department of Immigration tells us that it's using a 60% conversion rate, but the best rate the Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick ever achieved was 36% in 2023. If the new policy is implemented, we fear an even sharper decline in student enrolment, because the success vs. supply ratio is much lower in francophone rural areas.

This is another example of a policy focused on urban issues, like those we sometimes see in the Toronto area, which is experiencing all kinds of problems. However, we need to make sure that we don't end up with one-size-fits-all solutions.

• (0825)

The Chair: You have 15 seconds, Mr. Thomas.

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: Okay.

I would ask you to look at what can be done.

For example, it would be good if we could recognize how immigrants' knowledge can help the New Brunswick market. It's a responsibility the province has committed to taking on. The recent policy should also be amended to ensure that francophone minorities are protected. Finally, I believe that, as the only bilingual

province in the country, New Brunswick should be responsible for managing its immigration, like Quebec is currently doing.

Thank you for hearing me this morning.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thomas. You will be able to say more when you answer questions.

Mr. Dupuis and Mr. Thomas, I believe this is the first time you've appeared before the Standing Committee on Official Languages. So let me explain to you how we operate. For the first round of questions, each political party will have six minutes to ask questions and hear your answers. These are interactive questions, so you can expand on what you were saying.

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

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here. We know that for some people it's not the same time as it is here.

Mr. Chair, before we go any further, I'd like you to stop the clock because I'm going to move a motion.

On September 20, 2023, we adopted the motion that the committee invite the Minister of Official Languages, the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the President of the Treasury Board to appear as soon as possible to discuss their mandate and priorities in their portfolios, as well as their plans. Unfortunately, we learned in committee that Minister of Canadian Heritage Pascale St-Onge declined the committee's invitation. She is one of the ministers mentioned in the bill to modernize the Official Languages Act, which received royal assent last June. I would therefore like to move the following motion and for the committee to take a position on it:

That the committee reports to the House its disappointment at the refusal of the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Honourable Pascale St-Onge, to testify before the committee regarding her mandate and priorities with respect to official languages, as well as her obligations in connection with the implementation of the 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.

This is important, Mr. Chair. We already know the minister's answer, which is that she has delegated her authority, but—

The Chair: Mr. Godin, allow me to interrupt you for a moment to explain to the witnesses what is happening.

The rules of parliamentary procedure allow members of standing committees to interrupt the proceedings of a committee to move a motion. That is what's happening right now. The witnesses should therefore not feel personally targeted, because it doesn't concern them. That's all I wanted to say.

Mr. Godin, you may continue to speak to your motion.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you for clarifying that, Mr. Chair.

I would say to our witnesses that yes, it's a matter of procedure. Don't worry, I will ask you questions later.

So I will come back to what I was saying. The Minister of Canadian Heritage will say that she has delegated her authority to the Minister of Official Languages, but that minister is not mentioned in the act. When you delegate authority, you still have to be responsible. The department that has delegated authority to the Minister of Official Languages must still explain and be accountable. That's one reason we wanted to hear from the Minister of Canadian Heritage here at the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Unfortunately, she refuses to appear, and I would dare say that she is like Pontius Pilate and is washing her hands of it, which is unacceptable to all Canadians, especially official language minority communities.

• (0830)

The Chair: Mr. Serré, you have the floor.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Mr. Chair, we wish to propose an amendment to Mr. Godin's motion. We can send it to all members.

Several ministers have already appeared before the committee. We asked Minister St-Onge to come and testify, but normally, the committee can follow the process a little more closely. I therefore move that the motion be amended by adding the following after the words "in the House": "instructs the Chair to write to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Hon. Pascale St-Onge, to express". I also move to delete the words "reports to the House", the word "the", and the words "of the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Honourable Pascale St-Onge".

So the committee could agree to ask the Chair to send that letter and, if the minister doesn't come, we can adopt Mr. Godin's motion. It's a matter of following procedure. It would be more appropriate to send her a letter, because I don't think that was done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Serré.

The clerk advises me that it has already been sent.

Mrs. Goodridge, I'll turn it over to you.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you very much.

I take note of Mr. Serré's attempt to send a letter to the minister, but frankly, this has been going on for a long time. If the minister doesn't know, it's not the committee's fault. We really need to have the minister in front of us to talk to her. This is really important. I suggest that everyone vote against Mr. Serré's amendment and in favour of Mr. Godin's motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Goodridge.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'd like to come back to my colleague's comment about procedure. I think that we in the Conservative Party of Canada have followed procedure. You even testified to that in front of the witnesses.

As my colleague mentioned, I call for a vote on Mr. Serré's amendment so that we can go ahead and question the witnesses. Actually, I should say "ask them questions", because perhaps "question" sounds more punitive, like we're dealing with criminals.

I know that they are allies. So, after we vote, we can ask our witnesses questions.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

From the comments we heard earlier, I understood that a letter has already been sent. Is that correct?

The Chair: In fact, that referred to the amendment moved by Mr. Serré being emailed to committee members. We should have received it at our MP addresses.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Okay.

I thought a new letter had been sent to the minister.

The Chair: No.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I am in favour of writing a letter to the minister. However, I would like the letter to ask the minister to reconsider her decision and see if she can find time in her schedule to appear before the committee.

If we report to the House, at this point it would be playing politics. However, if we send a letter to the minister asking her to reconsider her decision, I feel that would be a much more collaborative way of working with her. It must be understood that the legislation resulting from Bill C-13 is new and certain responsibilities have now come into effect, as my colleague mentioned.

• (0835)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, we don't want to play politics; it's important we make that clear.

The committee sent a letter, a request to the minister, who declined the invitation—and I hope she knows it. In my opinion, it wouldn't be a good idea to extend a second invitation. The way I see it, the government wants to play politics so that the minister doesn't end up in hot water. It's important to mention that detail.

I don't want to spar over who is playing politics. These are the facts: An invitation was sent to the minister, whose responsibilities include the positive provisions in the Official Languages Act, and she declined the invitation. As a committee, do we need to send another letter asking the minister to reconsider our request and wait for her response? No, we are a parliamentary committee; we have to respect the institutions here in Parliament.

I think we owe it to ourselves to proceed in the manner set out in my motion. I'm not comfortable with my colleague Mr. Serré's proposed amendment.

The Chair: Before giving the floor to Mr. Beaulieu, I'd like to clarify something. The committee did ask witnesses, including the minister, to come and testify, but it was not the Chair who did so, because it is never the Chair who writes. It was the committee that made the request.

For the benefit of the public following our work, I'd like to remind you that all ministers and leaders of our political parties have the right under parliamentary rules to decline an offer to come and testify before a committee, without any justification.

Let's go back to Mr. Godin's motion, to which Mr. Serré subsequently moved an amendment. The floor is open for debate.

Mr. Beaulieu, the floor is yours.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): I don't want to prolong the debate too much, but based on what you've told us and the impression we have, she refused to appear. She just doesn't want to come. We're not going to start going back and forth, sending her another letter and having her say no again. I think we should express our disappointment.

The Minister of Canadian Heritage is responsible for Part VII of the Official Languages Act, with respect to all positive provisions. She plays a central role in the administration of the act. So I don't understand why the minister refuses to appear before the committee; it doesn't make sense.

The Chair: Regarding something you said at the outset, Mr. Beaulieu. I have the minister's answer here. For the information of those around the table, the Minister is declining the invitation to appear before our committee on the grounds—and committee members already know this—that the official languages responsibilities have been decreed to the Minister of Official Languages, who will therefore be in a better position to answer their questions.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Does that mean that—

The Chair: Nothing more, nothing less.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: —Canadian Heritage no longer administers Part VII of the Official Languages Act?

The Chair: I can't say anything more than the answer we received.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As far as I'm concerned, that's a cop-out. It makes no sense.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, do you have any other comments before I give the floor to Mr. Serré?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: No, that's all.

The Chair: Mr. Serré, go ahead.

Mr. Marc Serré: Other notices of motions have been put forward to call other ministers, including the Minister of Canadian Heritage. We can't have the same minister appear every two weeks. Other motions have already been submitted to the committee to call the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Minister of Official Languages to appear before our committee. I think this is the third time Mr. Godin has moved a motion of this kind.

I therefore propose that we send a letter to the minister to express our disappointment.

We have witnesses here right now, and we should hear from them. I would suggest that we not discuss these motions in front of the witnesses, because we're wasting their time. The witnesses took time from their day to appear before our committee. We have a witness on videoconference from Alberta who woke up at six o'clock in the morning to talk to us. In the second hour of the meeting, peo-

ple from Northern Ontario will be appearing and they have important things to tell us as well. If we continue in this manner, we'll be wasting our time again. It's important that we talk to the witnesses and ask them questions.

I therefore move that we adjourn debate on the motions so we can put our questions to the witnesses.

• (0840)

The Chair: It's a proper motion to adjourn. According to the rules of procedure that apply here, this motion is not debatable, so we will vote on adjourning the debate.

I don't see unanimous consent. So we will—

Mr. Joël Godin: Excuse me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: May I make a comment?

The Chair: We can't debate this and it has to go to a vote.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): We can't debate it.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: I also have a point of order.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: When we call for a vote, we are not required to vote. However, when we ask for the debate to be adjourned, we must vote.

The Chair: Yes.

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

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: My colleague said that I moved the motion three times.

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Mr. Marc Serré: No. That's not what I said.

The Chair: As chair of the committee, it is my role to tell you that the committee can't debate this and we must now vote on adjourning the debate.

If there's a point of order on the request for a vote on adjourning debate, I'll hear it. If not, we will proceed with the vote so that we can then hear from the witnesses.

So we will vote on the adjournment of debate.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: We are resuming debate on Mr. Godin's motion and the proposed amendment to that motion by Mr. Serré. We'll start with the amendment. Is there any further discussion on this amendment?

I don't see anyone online who wishes to speak.

Mr. Godin, do you have a question?

Mr. Joël Godin: As you can see, no one wishes to take the floor, so I will ask you to call the vote.

The Chair: To be polite, I was looking at each member of the committee. I often don't see that members attending the meeting virtually have raised their hand on the screen.

We will now vote on Mr. Serré's amendment, which proposes that the chair send a letter to the minister rather than proceeding according to Mr. Godin's original motion.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: We will now vote on Mr. Godin's main motion.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Excuse me, Mr. Chair. I would ask that the motion be read a second time.

The Chair: Okay.

That the Committee report to the House its disappointment at the refusal of the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Honourable Pascale St-Onge, to testify before the committee regarding her mandate and priorities with respect to official languages, as well as her obligations in connection with the implementation of the 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.

Mr. Marc Serré: I request that we suspend, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: A point of order.

I find it absolutely incredible that the governing party has just said that it doesn't want to waste time, but is now trying to waste time.

I have some important questions for Mr. Dupuis. I'm proud to welcome another Franco-Albertan today. We must give him the time he deserves.

• (0845)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Goodridge.

Mr. Godin has the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Yes, we're hearing two things from the government representatives. They want to save time, but they are wasting it. They asked that the amendment and motion be read again. They are asking for a suspension.

Mr. Chair, I find this unacceptable and disrespectful of our witnesses. As our colleague said, some people got up very early this morning because they are in a different time zone.

I thank Mr. Dupuis for being here and for being patient.

The Chair: Mr. Serré has the floor.

Mr. Marc Serré: Mr. Chair, in terms of wasting time, the Conservative Party is the source of this hypocrisy.

There were witnesses here, and once again the Conservatives introduced motions about witnesses and ministers. There are other motions. If we want to vote on it, let's vote on it. Let's go.

Mr. Godin repeated the same thing five times. I think it's time we get started.

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

Mr. Marc Serré: No point of order is in order. We have witnesses here. It's time to talk to the witnesses. There are important things to do in committee.

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

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré: They're playing political games again. We have witnesses here from Alberta and New Brunswick. Witnesses

from Sudbury are coming. I think we can start hearing from the witnesses.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Let's vote on it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Godin has a point of order.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I find my colleague's comments unacceptable and I would like him to apologize. He accuses me of speaking too often to repeat the same thing, which is totally wrong. That's what he just did. He just repeated exactly the same thing he said earlier.

Mr. Chair, I would ask my colleague to apologize.

The Chair: As far as I'm concerned, Mr. Godin, none of the language used by either party was in violation of the rules. I believe that the witnesses as well as all the people listening to us in Canada have noticed that both sides are doing some political manoeuvring.

Do the members want to vote? If we want to get things moving, I think that we should get to the vote. That's what Mr. Serré just said.

Is the committee ready for the vote? I see Mr. Généreux nodding in agreement. Are you okay with that, Mr. Godin?

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I agree with you completely. We've been wanting to proceed with the vote for a while now.

The Chair: The vote is on Mr. Godin's motion.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: The motion passes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Will you send it to us?

The Chair: Yes, once it's been written up, I'll send it to the committee members while respecting its content as much as possible.

Let's return to our witnesses.

Mr. Godin, you've used up 15 seconds of your allotted time. You have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for their patience.

Mr. Dupuis, you mentioned that your business is a family business. You managed to multiply this wealth that is your business and pass it on to your children, which is much to your credit. I'm thinking you may have inherited it from your parents or grandparents.

I'd like you to explain to us what kind of tools aren't currently offered that would make it easier to sustain a francophone business in Alberta, and that would make it more attractive for francophones to consume your products and work for you.

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

There's one tool I find important. We've started the process on some funding applications, and what we noticed is that there are a lot of bureaucratic roadblocks we need to manoeuvre around.

Francophones in minority language communities don't necessarily get any explanation of how that process works. No one helps us understand the government processes. Not everyone understands them. That is the most serious lack, in my opinion.

• (0850)

Mr. Joël Godin: If I understand correctly, you want us to cut the red tape. You're spending a lot of time filling out countless forms. Cutting this red tape would speed up processing and response times, which would allow you to run your cheese-making operation more efficiently.

Is that right?

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Dupuis.

Mr. Thomas, you mentioned that recruiting francophone immigrants is always harder in rural regions. You really pointed to that as a problem.

As president and CEO of the Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick, what would you do if you were in our shoes? What measures would you put in place to make the rural regions of New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada more attractive to francophone immigration, but also to promote economic development outside of the rural markets?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

That's a really important question.

There are many factors that make rural regions less attractive for international immigration. There are a lot of French-language resources in developing countries, like those in Africa, for example.

People from African cities who are more educated and have had the opportunity to graduate from grade 12 or equivalent are much more interested in cities like Montreal, Vancouver or Moncton. Tracadie isn't always the obvious choice, for instance. That said, we can always do more.

I completely agree with Mr. Dupuis about the fact that federal rules are very complicated for small businesses. There's a lot of paperwork. On average, we receive two applications for each international student that is accepted. This approach is more suited to big cities than to smaller municipalities. Indeed, it sometimes takes seven or eight letters before a candidate from Africa will choose to settle in Bathurst, Edmunston or Shippagan. That's the hard part. We talk about centralizing and about doing what looks good, but that can lead to even greater access.

In terms of applications, sometimes second languages come into play. Over the last seven to 10 years, the proportion of French spoken at home has dropped in New Brunswick. That's why we need to welcome more immigrants who mainly speak French. That said, passing the French test isn't always easy. When we get applications, more often than not there are many more anglophone candidates. That's why I'm saying that New Brunswick should be master of its own destiny and maintain a ratio of one-third anglophones to two-thirds francophones.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Thomas, immigration is one thing, but are you able to keep young francophones in your community so that they can build the future of our rural regions?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: Yes, but we'll need more decentralized services.

For example, technology can be used anywhere these days. When rural regions don't have high-speed Internet, young people have no choice but to gravitate toward larger urban centres. If the regions also had high-speed Internet, I can promise you that francophones would stay put.

• (0855)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: A lot of people in Ottawa and Fredericton work from home. Why not give these people the option of working from home in Dalhousie, Campbellton or Tracadie?

The Chair: That's a solid argument, Mr. Thomas.

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: I see it as an incredible opportunity.

The Chair: I have to interrupt you because Mr. Godin's time is up.

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

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here today, especially Mr. Dupuis, given what time it is in his part of the country.

Mr. Dupuis, have you gotten any support from the provincial or federal government? You talked about how complicated the application process is. Were there any programs in place to help you get started, or to promote your development?

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: We got a lot of support. We applied for support in the context of many programs. The Conseil de développement économique de l'Alberta guided us in finding as much support as we could.

For instance, to help us set up our economuseum, the first in Alberta, the organization helped us get provincial funding through Travel Alberta, municipal funding, and federal funding through Prairies Economic Development Canada, as well as many other grants that were available.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm happy to hear that you've gotten support from the Conseil de développement économique de l'Alberta, whose role it is to promote economic development in rural regions. It's one way of making a contribution. I'm glad about that.

Is your municipality bilingual? I see that it's Vermilion.

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: No. Out of roughly 4,500 people, there are maybe 20 francophone families.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Mr. Thomas, I'm very happy that you could join us. I was also quite happy to hear you acknowledge, in your opening remarks, the contribution of Mr. Robichaud, a key player in the development of bilingualism in New Brunswick.

My question deals with the support you received from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, or ACOA. Is the ACOA working closely with you, and to what extent? I know that you don't receive any funding from the agency, but what exactly is your relationship to the ACOA?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: We've always had an excellent relationship with the ACOA. The agency has always supported the work of the Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick, like the Rendez-vous Acadie-Québec, the next edition of which will occur in the Acadian peninsula from May 28 to 30.

It's a bit more complicated for small businesses. Like Mr. Dupuis said, for francophone entrepreneurs in minority francophone communities, the forms are quite complicated. The French-language forms are even more so, at times. And small businesses don't always have the resources to fill them out.

For example, I was part of the application selection committee for the digital boost 2.0 program. Fewer than 15% of the applications came from francophone companies. Small francophone companies are less likely to get support because they don't really have the necessary staff to fill out the forms. Quite often, they just give up and never submit an application. It's the same problem Mr. Dupuis was talking about. The programs are there, but the problem is finding a way to help businesses fill out those forms.

Mr. Darrell Samson: The ACOA's role is to guide small businesses and francophone businesses and to work closely with them. Thank you for your answer.

You mentioned that finding workers is difficult in rural regions. Do you think that a rural economic development strategy should harness the potential of retired seniors who would like to work part time?

• (0900)

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: The answer is yes, and we're working hard on that. More and more retirees are going back to work. I myself am a retiree who went on to work for several organizations, like the Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you for the personalized response.

I often think to myself that government could develop strategies to encourage seniors to get involved in their communities.

Mr. Dupuis, do you do any kind of outreach with seniors? Is there any interest and are there any opportunities in your area?

One of you mentioned that attracting people to rural regions was challenging. Would retirees returning to work part time improve the situation in these regions?

The Chair: There are 10 seconds left.

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: Yes, we do. Our delivery man is a retiree; he works a few hours or a few days a week. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement that helps us out a lot.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dupuis.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

My first question is for Mr. Dupuis.

I admire your courage as well as your resilience or resistance. I've heard that 97.1% of Vermilion's population is unilingual anglophone. That means that almost everyone who speaks French needs to be bilingual.

In your business, do people mostly work in English or in French?

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: Only one of our five employees is unilingual anglophone. The others are all francophone. We all speak French at work.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

You still need to serve your clients in English though, right?

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: Yes, and we offer services in French to those who need it. We get a lot of tourists from Quebec driving through Alberta to get to the Rockies.

They stop in Vermilion to visit our business, because we provide service in French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In your opinion, when francophone immigrants settle in Vermilion, are they more likely to integrate in English or in French?

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: They're more likely to integrate in English, absolutely. In my 25-year military career, before retiring and starting my own business, I lived in almost every province, and it was quite a challenge forcing my kids to keep speaking French in the community.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Thomas, earlier you stated that the proportion of people who speak French at home is in decline and how important it is to orient francophone immigration towards regions with a high concentration of francophones.

Could you elaborate on that a bit?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: We shouldn't orient them exclusively to majority francophone areas. If the proportion of anglophones in bilingual cities like Moncton goes up, although we may not end up in the same situation as Vermilion, little by little, meetings and discussions might get more complicated. That's what we see in majority anglophone cities, and even bilingual cities where both communities are pretty equally balanced.

In francophone regions, like Restigouche and the Acadian peninsula, we need people just to keep the levels of service, especially in health. The francophone community est very much alive and vibrant in these areas.

In my opinion, we need to ensure that we maintain a certain percentage. Actually, to reverse the decline that we've seen these past few years, as clearly stated by the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, or SANB, we'll need to increase the percentage of francophone immigration to maintain a economically vibrant francophone community.

• (0905)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Francophone immigrants who settle in Moncton are more likely to become anglicized than those who settle in the Acadian peninsula. Am I understanding that right?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: In terms of second language, the immigrants who settle in Moncton, even the francophone ones, probably think that big cities offer more employment opportunities. That's where all the better-paid jobs are.

These people become anglicized more rapidly instead of maintaining their French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: So you'd agree on the principle of wanting to regionalize francophone immigration and targeting regions with a strong francophone concentration.

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: Yes, and I'd also include Moncton, which is really where most of the bilingual services in Atlantic Canada are. There are a lot of translation and call centre jobs there, among others.

If we lose all that, we'll also lose jobs. It would be a shame to lose a place like Moncton, which is highly francophone, after all. The entire periphery of the of city is francophone.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's so interesting to me, the inevitability of the principle of territoriality. That's how languages work. So it's communities with a strong francophone concentration that can sustain French. Incidentally, that was the basic principle of Bill 101.

Under the Official Languages Act newly amended by Bill C-13, some measures will come into force in two years, I believe, to compel federally regulated businesses to provide services in French in regions with a high concentration of francophones.

Have you heard about that? Were you consulted on it?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: The Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick was not consulted. That said, French-language federal services in Moncton, and even in the capital, Fredericton, are fairly satisfactory. None of our members challenged this new amendment, but we're always willing to receive more.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Thomas and Mr. Beaulieu.

Now we'll move on to Ms. Ashton, from the NPD, for six minutes.

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

I'd also like to thank the witnesses.

Whenever we talk about economic development and all of the things that are needed to make it happen, we also need to talk obstacles. About that, access to child care and educational services in

French in our communities is an issue that comes up a lot in this committee.

Some witnesses have stated that, if the necessary child care services were available in French, our rural regions and francophone communities would be more welcoming and better able to convince families to stay. We know, of course, that there's a labour shortage, not just in that area, but in francophone communities across the country.

My first questions will be for you, Mr. Thomas. How are the impacts of the labour shortage manifesting in francophone schools, in child care services and in health, which you've also mentioned in passing? What impacts is it having on the economy of francophone communities in your region?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: That's a really interesting point. When it comes to child care, there isn't much of an issue in francophone majority communities, other than the fact that finding people is hard, as it is in every other area. In places like Moncton and Fredericton, however, more and more francophone parents are having to send their kids to anglophone day care, which is bad.

That's why, in response to your colleague's question earlier, I said that we shouldn't neglect francophone immigration to urban centres. Indeed, that's where kids come to befriend anglophone kids, and after a year, they end up speaking English more often than French. It's a major problem, especially for young children. In urban centres in New Brunswick, many parents have no choice but to send their children to anglophone day care.

• (0910)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for letting us know. That's quite concerning. The same thing is happening in Manitoba.

We talk about economic development, about wanting to keep our people, our youth and our creativity. Do you think that investing in these sectors that are experiencing a labour shortage, not only child care but also education, could help keep young people and families in our francophone communities?

Mr. Gaëtan Thomas: Absolutely.

It's the labour shortage. That's why, in our case, we need to go get the students, we need to recognize their skills. This is as much a problem in New Brunswick as it is anywhere else, even though the province is bilingual.

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

Mr. Dupuis, I'd like to ask you the same question. I don't know what kind of French-language child care and education services there are in Vermilion. As we know, francophone education is a vibrant sector in Alberta. I heard you say that it's difficult to convince kids to speak French in an English-speaking environment.

I live in northern Manitoba, which isn't a francophone area. We know that schools can be community meeting places, in a sense. Do you think that, in your community, there should be more French-language services in child care and education, and more support for those services, in order to welcome francophones and convince them to stay so that they can contribute to the region's economic development?

Mr. Patrick Dupuis: As far as child care is concerned, my youngest is 26 years old, so I'm not exactly aware of everything going on in that area.

That said, I know that there are no bilingual child care services in Vermilion.

I know that, in the surrounding areas, there are a lot of bilingual communities, such as St. Paul, Wainwright and Bonnyville, and there are child care centres there.

Certain things struck me when we moved to Alberta. My kids went to French school until grade six. Starting in grade seven, there weren't enough children in the francophone schools to offer all of the services kids need for their development, such as community activities and chemistry, physics, and advanced mathematics classes. There was none of any of that. So these children had to make the transition to an English school. That happened to most of the kids that we know in the area. Starting in grade seven, children need to switch to an English school to get all of the necessary services.

A lot more schools are offering French immersion, but there aren't many fully francophone schools. There might be one or two in the region. Starting in grade seven, the kids switch schools. Some other options were put forward, like distance learning for teenagers, but that doesn't give kids the opportunity for the kind of camaraderie that develops between francophone friends at recess, secondary activities, and so forth.

I hope that answers your question.

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

First, Mr. Thomas, thank you for your testimony. I know you well. I know that you understand the whole dynamic around Acadian small businesses in New Brunswick, as well as their challenges. Mr. Dupuis, I think the committee sees you as something of an Asterix figure; what he was to his Gaulish village of resistance fighters, you are to Vermilion and the whole region east of Edmonton, Alberta. What your sister and yourself are doing is impressive. It's like Asterix and Obelix.

Before you leave us and we are joined by three more witnesses for the next hour, I'd like to tell you that what happened this morning is part of democracy. It can be frustrating for witnesses when they see so much time spent on motions, but the ability to move motions is part of the parliamentary process and one of the members' privileges. It isn't always pleasant for witnesses, but it is part of our democracy. We should consider ourselves lucky to be able to do that in Canada, because it's not always so easy elsewhere in the world. I'm sorry for what you went through this morning, but it's part of the vagaries of the parliamentary system.

Thanks again for your testimonies. Before suspending the sitting as we welcome the next group of witnesses, I'll add that, if you wish to submit additional information to the committee, you can send everything to our clerk, who will forward it to all the members quickly. Whether verbal or written, your testimonies are just as important and meaningful to us.

Thanks again.

The meeting is suspended.

● (0915) _____ (Pause) _____

● (0915)

The Chair: Let's move on to the second hour of the meeting.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses to this second hour.

Joining us remotely, we have Marc Gauthier, board chair of the Association canadienne-française de l'Ontario du grand Sudbury; François Afane, executive director of the Conseil de développement économique des Territoires du Nord-Ouest; and Madeleine Arbez, executive director of the Economic Development Council for Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities.

I imagine it must be very early in the Northwest Territories.

Welcome to you all. Allow me to explain the process. Everyone will have the floor for approximately five minutes. If you can deliver your remarks in under five minutes, then we'll have more time for questions. I will be very strict with the time. You can make your opening remarks, then there will be a round of interactive questions with the various parties that are represented by the committee members.

So let's start with you Mr. Gauthier. You have the floor for a maximum of five minutes.

● (0920)

Mr. Marc Gauthier (Board Chair, Association canadienne-française de l'Ontario du grand Sudbury): Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today regarding your study.

I am here on behalf of the Association canadienne-française de l'Ontario du grand Sudbury, or the ACFO of greater Sudbury. Our mission is to engage and mobilize the francophone community, protect the rights of francophones and advance the priorities of the francophone community. We serve francophones who live in Sudbury East, Espanola and the city of Greater Sudbury.

Northern Ontario's economy has always been fragile, subject to fluctuations in the commodities market. For many communities in the region, the service industry has become the economic driver. For years, we have watched the exodus of our young people, leaving for big cities. Our population is getting older. The francophone community is not immune to the economic impact and is, arguably, more vulnerable because of its demographic weight.

To be a master of its own destiny, a community must exercise control over a range of economic levers. A community must govern its institutions. It must be active and wield influence in organizations that are shared by both linguistic groups. It must have access to the same resources as the majority population.

In Ontario, francophones have full responsibility for the management of their primary schools and high schools. We have responsibility for the management of two community colleges. Unfortunately, we still don't have responsibility for the management of university education in our region. The ACFO has, for decades, been calling for a French-language university that adheres to the principle of for, by and with Sudbury's francophones. According to an economic impact study commissioned by the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario and the University of Sudbury, a French-language university in Sudbury represents nearly \$90 million in economic potential and would generate more than eight dollars for every dollar invested by the various levels of government. That would mean direct and indirect jobs for residents, and give the community the ability to educate its young people in a way that meets its needs while keeping them in the north.

Last year, the ACFO commissioned a study on bilingualism at Greater Sudbury's city hall. Municipal government is the closest to citizens and thus plays a pivotal role in the lives of francophones. The study revealed a significant decline in the use of French at city hall. I'm not talking about front-line workers. I'm talking about the disappearance of French in decision-making bodies. That is why we must work so hard to highlight the value of francophones in a city where they make up just over 22% of the population.

As an economic lever, francophone immigration in northern Ontario is essential to the region's survival. Sudbury was designated a welcoming francophone community for immigrants. The ACFO works in partnership with other agencies to welcome newcomers and help them integrate into the area. One of the ACFO's responsibilities is preparing information kits for newcomers to make them aware of the available services in areas such as education, finance, employability and housing. In order to maintain the demographic weight of francophones in minority communities, it is crucial that the federal government increase and meet its francophone immigration targets annually.

Increasing the active offer of services in French means increasing demand for French-language services among the population. The demand must be felt by both government and private sector organizations. For years, the ACFO has made available on its website a list of institutions and businesses able to serve clients in French, and it is updated annually. This year, we decided to more actively address the linguistic insecurity of community members, and we are encouraging them to file complaints when their rights are not respected.

Up to now, I've talked about a few of the ACFO's initiatives to support the francophone community. It's worth noting that we do all that work thanks to the tireless efforts of a single employee, our executive director, Joanne Gervais. We also rely on a handful of volunteers who give their time, but it's not enough.

The ACFO is an underfunded not-for-profit organization, as are the many chapters of the ACFO in the province. We are grateful to

the Department of Canadian Heritage for the increase in operational funding we recently received, but it is nowhere near enough. We are currently running on \$72,000 in federal funding, which accounts for just 32% of our operating budget. To supplement our budget, we spend a lot of time fundraising, which takes us away from our main mission and eats up the time of our staff and volunteers.

If we had sufficient funding, we could hire the people we need to grow the place of francophones in our communities, ensure that organizations respect our rights and contribute to the vitality of our community.

That is urgently—

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gauthier. You'll have an opportunity say more during the question-and-answer portion afterwards.

Mr. Marc Gauthier: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we are going to hear from Mr. Afane, from the Conseil de développement économique des Territoires du Nord-Ouest.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Francois Afane (Executive Director, Conseil de développement économique des Territoires du Nord-Ouest): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning. I am speaking to you from Yellowknife, the traditional territory of Chief Drygeese and the ancestral land of the Yellowknives Dene. My name is François Afane, and I am the executive director of the Conseil de développement économique des Territoires du Nord-Ouest, or CDETNO for short.

The CDETNO was created 21 years ago, in 2003, with a vision to become a leading authority in economic development in the Northwest Territories. Our mission is to promote, stimulate and support sustainable economic development across communities in the Northwest Territories. One of the things that makes the CDETNO unique is that, despite being a francophone organization, we use our expertise to the benefit of all communities, whether francophone or anglophone.

As a member of the Réseau de développement économique et d'employabilité du Canada, RDÉE Canada, the CDETNO works in partnership with provincial and territorial organizations. In that capacity, the CDETNO focuses its efforts on three strategic pillars: entrepreneurship, employability and community economic development. My team and I compiled some figures to illustrate the CDETNO's relevance and give you an overview of the CDETNO's work over the past nine years, from 2015 to 2023.

Between 2015 and 2023, the CDETNO recorded 40,250 visits to its employment centre, and held 318 meetings with entrepreneurs looking to grow their business or start a business. In addition, the CDETNO held 477 information sessions on investment opportunities in the Northwest Territories.

A total of 726 jobseekers took advantage of our program to help disadvantaged people, Dress to Impress, which provides them with vouchers to acquire equipment, gloves, protective footwear and other work gear. We posted 692 job opportunities on our online job board, supported 382 employers in their efforts to recruit mainly francophone workers, and participated in 74 job fairs, some of which we put on.

A total of 6,523 jobseekers interested in opportunities in the Northwest Territories were provided with information, and 1,357 people attended local job fairs that we organized. What's more, we helped 50 young dropouts re-enter the workforce through employment and training opportunities. We also participated in Destination Canada's international recruitment event 16 times.

That's an overview of the CDETNO's work. Of course, I provided that information to the clerk, and it will be shared with the committee members. I also provided a few videos we've made over the years as well as personal accounts illustrating some of our success stories.

In conclusion, the CDETNO is the Northwest Territories' definitive source for all things related to economic development and employability, in French as well as in English. We sit on all the committees. Nothing in the way of economic development in the Northwest Territories happens without the CDETNO's involvement or leadership. We serve all populations in the Northwest Territories, from indigenous peoples and francophones to anglophones and allophones. Anyone new to the territory looking for a job, wanting to start a business or trying to recruit workers turns to us.

I will leave it there. Thank you.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Afane.

We will now hear from Ms. Arbez, from the Economic Development Council for Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities.

Go ahead, Ms. Arbez. You have five minutes.

Ms. Madeleine Arbez (Executive Director, Economic Development Council for Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities): Good morning, Mr. Chair, vice-chairs, members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages, and partners in the economic development of official language minority communities. Thank you for having me.

My name is Madeleine Arbez. A proud Franco-Manitoban, I hail from the land of Louis Riel. I'm honoured to be here today as the executive director of the Economic Development Council for Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities, or CDEM, which is a member of RDÉE Canada.

I am speaking to you from the city of Winnipeg, located on the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Métis nation.

The CDEM is the RDÉE of Manitoba. It was in the wake of the creation of the CDEM in 1996 that Raymond Poirier, executive director of the Association of Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities, or AMBM, began the work that led to the creation of francophone

economic development networks, or RDÉEs, in every province and territory, as well as the national organization, RDÉE Canada.

Manitoba's bilingual municipal leadership is at the helm of the AMBM Group, a consortium of three complementary organizations, the AMBM, the CDEM and Eco-West Canada, our most recent subsidiary, specializing in the green economy since 2008. Together, these three organizations actively contribute to the development, vitality and sustainability of Manitoba's francophone communities.

For Manitoba's francophone community, economic development is directly linked to municipal power. This unique model not only provides significant leverage, but also creates conditions conducive to the infrastructure and foundation needed to deliver programs, activities and events that make living in French normal and that support the development and sustainability of the francophone community.

By focusing on creating a sustainable framework, we are tackling development challenges head-on and giving ourselves a better chance of meeting the vitality indicators for official language minority communities.

On a personal note, I am proud to say that my mother, former senator Maria Chaput, helped greatly to highlight the importance of vitality indicators for official language minority communities whenever she could.

The indicators include the existence of institutions and the active offer of services, economic and social integration, and influence and power in public institutions—hence the existence of municipal infrastructure. That is precisely why our economic development model is connected to bilingual municipalities. Municipal government is the closest to the people.

As a not-for-profit organization, the CDEM provides bilingual municipalities, community development corporations, employers and promoters with a wide array of supports, from business, community economic development and employability services to economic immigration and tourism services. We also serve youth, mainly through financial literacy opportunities.

Keeping in mind our measures of success, I can tell you that it is thanks to the leadership of the AMBM, the CDEM and the AMBM Group—not to mention the borrowing capacity of the rural municipality of Taché—that the project to build the Taché community centre is under way. The municipality sees the project as a perfect opportunity to bring together the francophone community and help it grow.

Since 2021, the AMBM Group's three subsidiaries have been working to implement the Municipal Economic Recovery Strategy for municipal governments. Bold and forward-looking, the strategy includes \$259.3 million in infrastructure investments, encompassing sustainable development, tourism and digital infrastructure projects, \$11.6 million in economic development and entrepreneurship projects, and \$70 million to establish an endowment fund to grow and enhance infrastructure that will contribute to the development of francophone communities.

The strategy is the result of a broad consultation of Manitoba's 15 bilingual municipalities and their community development corporations, and was undertaken in 2020 by the CDEM and Eco-West Canada. We are in the process of completing a new round of consultations to identify the updated priorities of our member municipalities.

Efforts to implement the current strategy are already having a never-before-seen bolstering effect on the vitality and sustainability of francophone communities. In 2022-23—

• (0935)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Arbez.

You will have an opportunity to elaborate during the question-and-answer portion.

We will now begin the first round of questions. Each party will have five minutes. That gives us more time for the second round.

The Conservatives will start things off. Mr. Généreux, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses.

I noticed that several of you are members of the RDÉE, an organization dedicated to the economic development of francophone communities right across the country.

In the past few weeks, we've met with board members—who, by the way, are very active and represent the diverse economic situations in francophone communities throughout the country. Their executive director gave a very direct presentation.

I asked the board members about the fact that a number of organizations serving the francophone community across Canada provide services that, in some cases, overlap.

Do you think it's at all warranted or helpful to consider reducing the number of organizations? That way, those socially minded organizations working to foster economic development in francophone minority communities would have more funding.

That question is for the witnesses who are from RDÉE member organizations, specifically Mr. Afane and Ms. Arbez.

Could you tell me where you stand on that?

Mr. François Afane: Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

First, I'll say that you raise a good point.

I like to say that the national sport of francophones and the Gauls is fighting. We like bashing each other. Arguing is part of our nature as francophones. Being separated into small teams waters down the impact we are able to have.

At the same time, it's important to recognize that I'm speaking to you from a small, remote area in the Northwest Territories. The francophone organizations here actually opted to provide specialized services.

We have the Collège nordique, which handles the educational component and provides formal education.

We have a French-language school board as well as the Association franco-culturelle de Yellowknife, which takes care of culture and media. Anything having to do with economic development and employability is our responsibility at the CDETNO.

We have the benefit of being active in that area, and we are now recognized for our expertise, even by the anglophone community. Absolutely nothing economic development-related happens without our input, and that is the benefit we bring to our community.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You were saying that human nature is such that we argue, particularly in the francophone world, especially in Quebec. Obviously, every organization defends its turf in each of the fields it represents. I think it's normal to a certain extent.

How would you describe your current collaboration with each of these organizations?

I've been on the Standing Committee on Official Languages for several years. Several times, we heard about accountability and the fact that organizations are often underfunded or have trouble working together.

Once again, I commended the members of the RDEE board of directors for their dynamism and their outlook on the future.

Let's face it, the current state of the country's finances will dictate how we run the country in the future. The administration of funds granted to French-language minority communities throughout the country will come under a certain amount of scrutiny.

Do you think your relationship with other organizations could lead to dialogue or savings by working more closely together?

Mr. François Afane: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'd also like to hear what Ms. Arbez has to say on the matter.

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: I think our situation is a little different in Manitoba.

When it comes to francophone or French-speaking communities in Manitoba, a large number of communities are scattered all over the province. Indeed, bilingual municipalities are the home of many minority language communities living within an anglophone market.

We have many organizations playing a role in vitality indicators, as I said when I talked about the quality of life we offer to people who want to live their lives in French.

Of course, there's a certain amount of competition, but there's also a recognition of the fact that we have to work together to address every aspect of this vitality. It's necessary so that people, be they newcomers or current residents, want to stay.

It is up to us to work together to compare our budgets, mandates and work to make sure we are all pulling in the same direction.

• (0940)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Arbez.

We are now moving on to the second round of questions. We are leaving Kamouraska to head to southeastern Ontario.

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

Mr. Francis Drouin: It's where the sun rises in Ontario, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I would say after the Atlantic, though.

Mr. Francis Drouin: That's right. I did specify "in Ontario".

I thank all the witnesses for being here with us.

Ms. Arbez, I listened carefully to what you said. I really liked what you said about coming from Louis Riel's land. I will now use that expression when I meet Franco-Manitobans.

There were a few changes in your government, in Manitoba. Within the framework of your relationship with this government, is there an openness towards the francophonie?

Does Minister Glen Simard really understand Franco-Manitobans' reality?

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: When Premier Kinew participated in the debate organized by CDEM before the election, he insisted on debating in French, in recognition of the francophone community. He also met with the president of the Association of Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities, or AMBM.

For our part, we already met with ministers from ministries that fund CDEM and AMBM. So there is a good relationship. The government also recognizes Manitoba's francophonie, which shows that we can indeed work together.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I see.

The government of Manitoba also adopted a French-language services policy.

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Is there a way to improve the French-Language Services Policy in Manitoba? Do you think improvements are possible?

How does this align with the municipal economic development that you represent?

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: That is an excellent question.

Manitoba's French-Language Services Policy is based on active offer. Selected ministerial services are those that serve the public, the greatest possible number of francophones, if you will. It is also based on the number of people demanding services in French.

The problem is that many people in our official language minority communities don't demand their services in French, especially outside of urban centres. We're working a lot on that aspect. We often meet with representatives of the Francophone Affairs Secretariat, the person responsible for language services, as well as other government representatives.

That said, there is broad recognition of the value of French on an economic level and within Manitoba's community. There is also the fact that our organization was created by municipalities, which also created 15 bilingual municipalities.

More and more municipalities are inviting us to come and give a presentation on the way to become a bilingual municipality, including structure, bylaws, status and an operating process that is, in fact, the first in Canada.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Very well.

I come from a family that worked on the municipal level. When it comes to Bill 8, the Ontario French-Language Services Act, my father always said he represented an 80% francophone municipality. But when it came time to endorse Bill 8, not every municipality did so.

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: Yes.

Mr. Francis Drouin: He always told me that the way he spoke to mayors was important. He would ask them if, in their opinion, he should speak only French to the linguistic minority in his municipality, meaning the 20% of anglophones. That is more or less how he managed to convince other mayors.

The threshold is important. How many francophones do your bilingual municipalities represent, on average? Are they the majority or the minority?

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: No, francophones in these municipalities are all in a minority situation. Even in Winnipeg, which is included in the bilingual municipalities, they are a minority. Indeed, it is a first.

I will give you an example. In one of the municipalities that invited us, the people were all anglophones. They told us they wanted to become a bilingual municipality. They recognized that they had francophone colleagues and neighbours, as well as francophone businesses serving clients and offering opportunities.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I see.

Mr. Gauthier, as a Franco-Ontarian, I'm not ignoring you. My colleague will ask you some questions.

Mr. Afane, in the Northwest Territories, offering services in French and serving francophones must be quite a challenge. In such a vast territory, how do you manage to offer services to your fellow citizens, to the public you represent?

• (0945)

Mr. Francois Afane: Thank you for the question.

We are trying to do the best we can with the resources we have. The territory is indeed vast. We therefore work with organizations or stakeholders on the ground and, as much as possible with the means we have, we travel. I must admit it's a constant challenge, because we are more concentrated in Yellowknife. In fact, 40% of the population is concentrated in Yellowknife, unfortunately. We still want to deploy our efforts into communities.

The Chair: There are 30 seconds left.

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

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

We are now leaving the rural regions to go to the tip of the island of Montreal.

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

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

I thank all the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Afane, in the handout we received, it says the goal of your organization is to ensure the francophonie's economic development in your territory.

You said you offer services in all languages, in all communities.

Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

Are you actually serving the francophonie or, in the end, is it really something else?

Mr. Francois Afane: Thank you very much, Mr. Beaulieu.

As an organization, we are vigorous advocates for French.

If you want a service offered in French, give it to a francophone organization, because it will be sure to protect French while meeting the needs of the anglophone majority community.

If you give the service to an anglophone organization, French just becomes something pushed off to the side.

As a francophone organization, we have employability and business start-up skills. We made a place for ourselves on the market, which makes us a competent organization to serve the francophone community.

Given the shortfalls observed within the community, members of the anglophone community started to communicate with us to say they would also like to benefit from our services.

Nonetheless, at the base, we remain a francophone organization that cares deeply about defending francophones. We are mandated

to do so, but we also support anglophone organizations and employers.

How do we do that? For example, we recommend francophone workers to anglophone employers, telling them that the workers are French-speaking and we suggest hiring them.

We publish job offers and support employers so that they recruit French-speaking workers. It helps increase the pool of francophones in our community.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do you think there are businesses where the language of work is mainly French?

Mr. Francois Afane: There are a few, but I must admit there are not many.

Within their team, some entrepreneurs work in French. However, when they have to work with clients, they do so in English. An entrepreneur who only works with francophones won't have a huge bottom line, because there are not many francophones in the community. We barely represent 10% or 15% of the population.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That is probably the first official language spoken.

I will now turn to Mr. Gauthier.

You said that Greater Sudbury is 22% francophone. That means French is pretty much a minority.

You also said there is no university created by and for francophones.

Could you tell us more about that?

Do you think it's important for Sudbury to have a university created by and for francophones?

Would that help francophone economic development in Greater Sudbury?

Mr. Marc Gauthier: Yes, that aspect is important and would help us.

As our local university, the University of Sudbury, is bilingual, the priorities of the majority often take precedence over those of the minority.

Unfortunately, as a result of its financial problems, the University of Sudbury invoked the CCAA, the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act. Several French language programs were eliminated, even though they were viable.

We would like to restore our economic leverage. As francophones, we want francophones, for and with francophones, to choose the interesting programs we should be offering. That would make us a more prominent and stronger economic stakeholder in our community.

It would also enable us to retain our young people.

Currently, we've been losing young francophones who have been going to Ottawa, where there is another bilingual university, the University of Ottawa.

Many young people have left the region, and those who leave our region often don't come back. There lies the danger, because we want to keep our young people here.

Moreover, if we had more control over the services we can provide, we could attract more francophone immigrants.

• (0950)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I was somewhat surprised to learn that Greater Sudbury's population is 22% francophone. Are they concentrated in certain neighbourhoods?

Mr. Marc Gauthier: Sudbury does indeed made up of 22% francophones, with 30% of the population reporting that they are bilingual.

Greater Sudbury is a city that was amalgamated quite a few years ago, and the concentration of francophones is higher in certain areas like La Vallée and Chelmsford.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gauthier and Mr. Beaulieu.

We are now leaving Montreal Island and heading for northern Manitoba.

Ms. Ashton, the floor is yours for five minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses from Manitoba and elsewhere.

Good morning, Ms. Arbez. I'll start the conversation with you. We all know about the very important work being done by the ED-CM here in Manitoba, and how you've been working very closely with our communities.

There's been a great deal of talk about this study on ways of ensuring successful economic development in our francophone communities. But it's important to mention the challenges as well. You said that circumstances in rural and remote communities were somewhat different and that these communities needed recognition and support in ways that would address their needs.

In committee, we've heard several times that one of the challenges was the long-term retention of young people and young families in our communities. We also heard about labour shortages in early childhood and education, factors that have a considerable impact on a family's decision as to whether or not to stay in the community to contribute to its economic development.

Could you tell us what you think about this? Are labour shortages in early childhood and education a barrier to economic development?

Should we be looking for solutions in this area, with federal government support of course?

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: Yes, definitely. The labour shortage is a key factor, together with affordable housing and other factors which we feel are barriers, along with others that need improvement if we

are to retain and attract new residents. We need them in these communities.

We are currently conducting a survey with the municipalities to measure the severity of the labour shortage in child care centres. It's a key factor, along with health care and education. It also affects basic services. Sometimes people sell their business, and their children don't want to take it over. These are assets we don't want to lose, because these businesses provide critical services to their communities.

Our economic immigration strategy and our field work have led us to make an effort to accurately identify what is happening in each municipality so that a list of positions that need to be filled can be drawn up. That would go hand-in-hand with our immigration targets and our objectives for the number of workers we would like to recruit every day in Manitoba. I wouldn't say it's a solution, but it's one of the options for dealing with this shortfall, based on a priority list of course, and the urgency of each situation.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay. Thank you very much.

I'm going to change to another topic that is relevant to our discussion of the challenges.

Here in Manitoba, we know the degree to which francophone international students contribute to our institutions and our communities, in both the short and long term. A few weeks ago, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship announced that he was going to have to limit the number of international students. We have not yet seen an exemption for francophone international students in acknowledgement of the fact that the reality is different in this area.

Do you think francophone communities in Manitoba are worried about this announcement?

Do you think they feel that attracting francophone students is a part of their future, not only for economic development, but also in general?

• (0955)

The Chair: There are 20 seconds left.

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: You're right, Ms. Ashton. It became clear that for francophone mobility, it was essential to place a priority on francophone workers. And francophone students are the first to enter the recruitment pool.

We are therefore concerned about this decision and its implications for both the Université de Saint-Boniface and for the recruitment of francophone students.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton and Ms. Arbez.

We have time for a second round of questions, but it will be slightly modified.

Mr. Dalton, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here with us.

Mr. Gauthier, back in the day, French Canadians came to Sudbury to work in mines, on farms and in forests.

Are these sectors still as important for French Canadians in this region?

Mr. Marc Gauthier: The mining sector remains an economic driver for the region, but the economy is much more diverse now.

Tertiary sector services, such as work in hospitals, colleges and teaching institutions, play a major role in the economy. The Sudbury region is more or less the capital of northern Ontario, and it has become a commercial hub for people. Entrepreneurship also plays a major role in the economy.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I've only ever been to Sudbury once, about 40 years ago. You said that in Sudbury today, just over 22% of people are francophones and 38% bilingual. That really surprised me.

Is the francophone population stable or decreasing?

You also mentioned that the francophone population in Sudbury was aging. Is it aging more than the rest of the population?

Mr. Marc Gauthier: Population size is important, but the problem is our demographic weight. There are not necessarily fewer francophones, but the city is growing and our demographic weight is decreasing. More anglophones are moving to Sudbury.

There is more anglophone immigration than francophone immigration. That's why it's important to have ongoing francophone immigration to our community.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I spoke about work in mines and forests. There could be lots of good jobs in the natural resources sector. And yet the current government is not encouraging this sector's development. I wonder whether that has an impact when younger people are trying to decide whether to remain in the region, where there are fewer opportunities for good jobs.

Mr. Afane, what measures do you think the federal government should take to make companies run by people in the linguistic majority aware of the potential advantages of bilingual communications and services?

Mr. Francois Afane: Thank you for the question.

The government could indeed help us convince people in the community, particularly entrepreneurs, to recruit bilingual staff. We tell employers that when they hire francophones to work in their organization, they bring new skills, and also open the door to new opportunities of which these employers were unaware. There is definitely a francophone community whose members are potential clients.

Proud francophones look to companies that encourage French, provide services in French, and show an interest in them. Providing services in French would help these companies find new customers.

• (1000)

Mr. Marc Dalton: What's the francophone population of the Northwest Territories, and how has it varied over the years?

What are the economic characteristics of this population?

Mr. Francois Afane: Thank you for the question.

The population of the Northwest Territories is 45,000, 20,000 of whom live in its capital, Yellowknife, which represents 40% or 50% of the population.

According to the most recent statistics, of Yellowknife's 20,000 inhabitants, approximately 2,000 identify as francophone and 2,000 to 3,000 as francophile, which means that they can understand and speak French. So out of Yellowknife's 20,000 inhabitants, 3,500 to 5,000 speak French. French is also being spoken increasingly in the city.

Mr. Marc Dalton: All right.

Ms. Arbez, how have the challenges facing your organization developed over the past decade?

Are the barriers the same or have they changed?

The Chair: That's an excellent question, Mr. Dalton, but we'll come back to it later because you're speaking time has run out.

The next questions will be from a Franco-Ontarian from a north that is changing rapidly.

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

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And I'd like to thank the three witnesses too.

Ms. Arbez, thank you for the work you've been doing in Manitoba. It's very important and I would encourage you to continue with your efforts.

Mr. Afane, I've been lucky enough to visit Yellowknife. Thank you for your additional details on the action plan we launched last year by adding \$1.1 billion. Funding for the action plan has doubled since 2015. Thank you very much for the work you've been doing.

My first question is for Mr. Gauthier.

First of all, Mr. Gauthier, thank you for the work you've been doing as the Conseil scolaire du Grand Nord's director of education, and for your current work as the chair of the Greater Sudbury AC-FO board of directors. Our congratulations also go to Joanne Gervais for the colossal work she's been doing every day in the Greater Sudbury area with her team of volunteers.

Thank you for your website, which provides information to the Greater Sudbury community, whose population is 170,000. My riding, Nickel Belt, is 49% bilingual, if the surrounding regions are included. With the exception of Mr. Drouin's riding, Nickel Belt is the most bilingual riding in Ontario.

I liked your earlier comments, because the University of Sudbury is extremely important as an economic driver for the region, "for, by and with" francophones. You said that every dollar invested by the federal government and the provincial government will be worth about eight dollars in terms of its impact on the economy.

Can you tell us more about the importance of having a university?

We have our school boards. I was a trustee on the Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario. We have Collège Boréal. I worked at Collège Boréal.

We need our university network in the mid-north now, because what we're talking about is local economic development.

Mr. Marc Gauthier: Thank you.

Its first impact is job creation and the ability to retain certain types of employees within the community, meaning academics who can add to the community's diversity. These people live in the community. They buy houses, cars and clothing. They buy food and pay for youth services. They make a contribution.

They also pay taxes to the municipalities, which go towards things like road maintenance and garbage collection. It becomes an economic driver. Francophones can then decide what their needs are and how to support the community. Young people can be trained in entrepreneurship, while at the same time allowing adults to further their professional development.

Mr. Marc Serré: You mentioned earlier that Sudbury was a welcoming community in terms of immigration, for both recruitment and retention.

Can you explain what the municipality of Sudbury and the ACFO do to keep francophone immigrants in the region?

• (1005)

Mr. Marc Gauthier: The municipality's role of course includes committees that decide on which immigrants they would like to have. There are several organizations. Some of them work directly on immigrant settlement and retention. Settlement is extremely important. For example, at the greater Sudbury community health centre, there is a section that receives immigrants and helps them with education and health.

Our role is to support these people and inform them about services in French in Sudbury. We work with all the agencies. We contact them and try to prepare a print version of our kit, because people don't always have Internet access. The kit is available online as well.

Mr. Marc Serré: We have 30 seconds left.

What's the ACFO's role with respect to the province of Ontario? How important is it to include the province of Ontario in these discussions?

Mr. Marc Gauthier: We make an effort to use our powers of persuasion in our work with our provincial MLAs. We have contacts with Mr. West and Ms. Gélinas, our regional MLAs.

We work directly with them and try to influence them through the ACFO, whether directly, or through other groups, such as the AFO, the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario.

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

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

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

My question is for all the witnesses.

In order to foster the economic development and vitality of francophone communities, should francophone immigration focus on those regions that already have a greater concentration of francophones?

Mr. Francois Afane: I would say so. In the north, francophone immigration is the only way for us to survive. Without it, our communities will certainly die. We have no choice but to rely on francophone immigration. It has to be one of our priorities, or the local francophone community will disappear.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I don't know whether the representatives of the other organizations would like to answer that question.

Should the focus be on francophone immigration in locations where there are currently the most francophones?

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: Yes. It's important to emphasize francophone economic immigration in those areas where there is a labour shortage. Not only that, but francophone density in these areas should be increased.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do you believe that increasing francophone economic immigration to locations that are almost entirely anglophone would amount to the same thing as sending them to areas where there are strong francophone communities?

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: Yes, in a way. In some communities, there is already a francophone community. Certain specific needs are dealt with. In other communities, there was an exodus of young people. What's required is to retain these young people in the community, in addition to the capacity to welcome new families and members.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

Mr. Gauthier, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Marc Gauthier: My only comment is that if francophone immigrants are sent to regions where there are no francophones, they may well not remain in that community. If a francophone community is prepared to accept them and integrate them, that would facilitate the integration process.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I couldn't agree more, Mr. Gauthier.

Ms. Arbez, you spoke about people who wanted to live their lives in French.

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: Yes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Generally speaking, is it possible for these people to live in French?

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: In Manitoba, there are certainly regions where it's possible to do that. Our goal is to make it possible to live in French in these communities.

Mr. Gauthier mentioned the English language. When there is francophone economic immigration recruitment, we make sure that people have a basic knowledge of English.

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

Ms. Madeleine Arbez: Nevertheless, our focus is on French.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Arbez and Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, the floor is yours for two minutes.

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

My questions are for Mr. Afane and they are similar to those I asked Ms. Arbez.

There are many parallels with the current state of affairs in the Northwest Territories.

Do you think the federal government needs to be part of the solution with respect to the labour shortage in early childhood and education, and in economic development?

Does the labour shortage make it less likely that families will remain in your area? Is it a barrier to retention and to economic development in the Northwest Territories?

• (1010)

Mr. Francois Afane: Thank you very much for your question.

My answer to all your questions, Ms. Ashton, is yes.

There's a chronic labour shortage in our region. I've often said that if we could put dogs or other animals to work we would. That's indicative of just how little respect our community gets.

For us, the early childhood challenge is huge. Families decide to leave our regions because they don't have access to child care services. We have only one francophone child care centre in Yellowknife. Its capacity is 37 spaces, and there are over 50 on the waiting list. That's just the official list.

If you factor in the other francophone families that send their children to anglophone schools and child care centres, the potential is enormous. We need support and assistance. Children are the fu-

ture. Once children begin child care in English, they continue their education in English and become completely anglicized.

We need support from the federal government. Early childhood education is vital to the survival of our communities. I only talked about Yellowknife. In other small communities, there aren't any francophone child care centres at all. Some small communities are dying a slow death because once the children become adults they leave and never return.

Government support would reinvigorate our francophone communities, and also make it possible for families that want to settle and remain in the community do so. That would contribute to retention.

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

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

The Chair: I'm going to have to adjourn the meeting because the room will soon be occupied by another committee, but I would first like to thank Ms. Arbez, Mr. Afane and Mr. Gauthier for their testimony, which will definitely contribute to our committee's work.

If there's any information you didn't have time to tell us about, you could always send it in writing to our clerk, who would then distribute it to the committee members.

Thank you once again for getting involved. It's been truly interesting. It's wonderful to see what a big and beautiful country we live in, and that also applies to francophones everywhere. I wish you all a pleasant weekend.

Mr. Joël Godin: I was just wondering what our agenda will be for our next meeting. Are we going to continue to study this report?

The Chair: Yes, and there will be witnesses.

Mr. Joël Godin: Okay. So that's in two weeks, on Monday.

The Chair: Right.

Thanks to everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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