



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Official Languages

LANG • NUMBER 073 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, March 26, 2013

Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Order, please.

Today is March 26, 2013. Welcome to the 73rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Pursuant to the Order of Reference of Wednesday, February 27, 2013, we are here to study Bill C-419, An Act respecting language skills.

Joining us is the member of Parliament for Louis-Saint-Laurent, Ms. Latendresse, who introduced this bill.

Ms. Latendresse, you have the floor.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am very happy to be here today. Of course, it is a bit unusual to be at this end of the table, but I am very pleased to be able to tell you about my bill.

First of all, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Official Languages for the opportunity to clarify my reasons behind Bill C-419 and the impact of the bill on our Parliament.

The unanimous support for this bill at second reading shows that we know how to work together for all Canadians. Bill C-419 is very much in line with the decisions made over the years by various governments to make the Parliament of Canada a bilingual institution.

Although Canada's linguistic duality has caused in the past and still continues to occasionally cause small hitches, it remains one of the main assets of the unshakeable political agreement between all Canadians.

Bill C-419 is one more step in the right direction toward harmony between the two linguistic groups, which we have been trying to establish for over 40 years.

[English]

It is with great pride that I bring this one stone to contribute to the consolidation of this great House that we are building together. The Parliament of Canada functions in both official languages. This means that Parliament, as an institution representing the people of Canada, adapts to Canadians and to the people they elect to represent them in the House, the MPs.

[Translation]

Officers of Parliament are an integral part of the great parliamentary machinery and must meet the criteria set out for Parliament. In a bilingual Parliament, bilingualism is an essential skill for those who are part of the inner workings. That is the basic premise of the whole spirit of Bill C-419.

[English]

In early November of 2011, the Conservative government nominated New Brunswick native Michael Ferguson to the position of Auditor General of Canada. To everyone's surprise, and furthermore in breach of tradition, it surfaced immediately that Mr. Ferguson was not bilingual, that is to say, he had neither passive nor active skill in one of Canada's two official languages.

[Translation]

I would like to remind the committee that, when the government posted the competition notice, it was clearly indicated that proficiency in both of Canada's official languages was a prerequisite. Bill C-419 would solve the problem that was created by making bilingualism an essential skill for officers of Parliament under the law.

[English]

The government has apologized for this unfortunate faux pas, and it is my opinion that the apology was heartfelt. In the long process of making Parliament work for Canadians, tiny glitches are to be expected. They serve a precise purpose, teaching us to learn from our mistakes so that we can forge forward on ground that will be both firmer and better marked.

In recent months I have travelled across Canada to meet with the various actors involved with promoting the rights of Canadians living in linguistic minority environments. I have met with wonderful people in Moncton, St. Boniface, and other places. Every last one of them understood the bilingualism of Parliament to be a given. Their support for Bill C-419 was overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

When I started working on this bill, I had to consider several angles to this situation. As everyone here can easily testify, when language becomes a political issue, emotions quicken. Language lies so close to identity in the human heart that extra efforts are necessary to master oneself when a slight is perceived, be it genuine or imaginary. Sensibilities are so easily hurt that every last word must be chosen carefully.

[Translation]

Among the factors that contributed to the direction of my work on this bill, one factor kept coming back to me and I felt it was more significant than all the others. I remembered the outstanding work of former Auditor General Sheila Fraser.

She was fully bilingual and was able to understand everything without the help of an interpreter. When she was digging deeper into the scandal whose epicentre was in Quebec, if she had needed things to be translated all the time, I think that would have had a negative impact on her work.

Imagine for a second what it would be like if the Auditor General of Canada did not understand a word of English. How much would his work slow down if he relied on interpretation at every stage? Such a thing is inconceivable because it is so absurd.

The institution of the Parliament of Canada belongs to Canadians and, as a mirror of our democratic will, it must reflect our country and its linguistic duality. Everyone agrees on that. We now have an opportunity to take our decision one step further. That was my intention with Bill C-419.

• (1535)

[English]

To conclude, I believe that honourable committee members have already understood the positive impact of this bill for the furthering of our goals as a country.

I look forward to hearing any questions this committee may wish to ask.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Latendresse.

We will now hear from Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank my colleague Ms. Latendresse for her presentation on Bill C-419.

Ms. Latendresse, I would like to look at a few of the clauses in the bill to see how far we can go with it. My other colleagues also have some questions.

The preamble of Bill C-419 reads as follows:

Whereas the Constitution provides that English and French are the official languages of Canada;

Whereas English and French have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of Parliament;

Whereas members of the Senate and the House of Commons have the right to use English or French during parliamentary debates and proceedings;

And whereas persons appointed with the approval by resolution of the Senate, the House of Commons or both Houses of Parliament must be able to communicate with members of those Houses in both official languages;

Now, therefore, Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate and House of Commons of Canada, enacts as follows:

Why did you include that preamble in the bill?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: First of all, the preamble is important because it provides a more concrete explanation of why this bill was introduced. Basically, it has an interpretive value for courts that may need to study this piece of legislation. The part that talks about the persons appointed with the approval by resolution of the Senate, the House of Commons or both Houses of Parliament is the cornerstone for determining the positions that must be bilingual. I think the preamble plays a major role in helping to interpret what an officer of Parliament is. In the future, if there are new officers of Parliament, this can help to determine which positions to add.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That means that parliamentarians have the right to be served in the language of their choice, meaning one of the two official languages, and that officers of Parliament must be bilingual so that parliamentarians can receive that service, correct?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, absolutely. Parliamentarians can choose to use either English or French. They can do whatever they want in Parliament in either of the two languages, and they will be supported.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Having a preamble to a bill is not new.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Absolutely not. It is quite common. In addition, that can be of great help to those who must interpret the legislation. The preamble can be very useful.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Clause 2 on language skills says: "... be able to understand English and French without the aid of an interpreter...". This refers to the appointment of an officer of Parliament. When it says "without the aid of an interpreter", that does not mean that the Auditor General will not be allowed to use the services of interpreters if he comes to a committee meeting. That is not what that means, right?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: No, not at all. Actually, when someone's skills are assessed in one of the two languages, they must be able to understand what is being said without the aid of an interpreter. That does not mean that the person is not allowed to use an interpreter.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Why did you use the words "without the aid of an interpreter" in your bill?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Actually, that is what the Official Languages Act says in reference to appointments to federal courts. It is subsection 16(1). I can read it to you.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, please.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Subsection 16(1) reads as follows:

Every federal court, other than the Supreme Court of Canada, has the duty to ensure that:

(a) if English is the language chosen by the parties for proceedings conducted before it in any particular case, every judge or other officer who hears those proceedings is able to understand English without the assistance of an interpreter;

(b) if French is the language chosen by the parties for proceedings conducted before it in any particular case, every judge or other officer who hears those proceedings is able to understand French without the assistance of an interpreter; and

(c) if both English and French are the languages chosen by the parties for proceedings conducted before it in any particular case, every judge or other officer who hears those proceedings is able to understand both languages without the assistance of an interpreter.

We are talking about understanding the language, not about the fact that the person will never be allowed to use an interpreter. It is important that those people understand what is being said without the assistance of an interpreter.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I think the government has already said in the House of Commons that it agrees with the 10 positions listed in your bill. We will see this later on.

Clause 3, entitled “Regulations”, states:

The Governor in Council may, by order, add offices to the list established in section 2.

Why does it have to be the Governor in Council?

● (1540)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: We thought it was a good idea to have the Governor in Council. In fact, if new positions for officers of Parliament are created, it is essential to add them to the list as soon as possible. If the government recognizes that bilingualism is very important for the 10 positions listed, I don't see why a new officer of Parliament would not be added to the list right away.

So the reason why we decided to grant this power to the Governor in Council was simply to make the process of adding people to the list easier and faster.

Mr. Yvon Godin: But currently, the Governor in Council has the power to appoint new officers.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The Governor in Council appoints an officer and then seeks the approval of the House and the Senate. That is exactly what happened recently with the Commissioner of Official Languages. He has been in office for seven years and his mandate was extended by three years. The government appointed him and his appointment was then submitted to the committee and the House of Commons for approval. But it is still the Governor in Council that appointed him.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: It was the one who made the decision initially. We can easily ask ourselves why it would not be able to simply add positions if it so wishes. We have no objection to giving this power to the Governor in Council.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Furthermore, this is what you say about the interim appointment: 4. In the event of the absence or incapacity of the incumbent of any of the offices listed in section 2 or vacancy in any of these offices, the person appointed in the interim must meet the requirements set out in section 2.

Appointments do not necessarily take place every seven years. My understanding is that, if someone hands in their resignation, the person replacing them in the interim must be bilingual.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I think there are enough people who speak both languages in our country that we can find a bilingual person to be appointed in the interim. I don't think this is a problem.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Gourde, you have the floor.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Latendresse, thank you for coming to meet with us and for going through this exercise.

Your preamble says: “Whereas the Constitution provides”. Have you drawn this from the Constitution Act, 1867?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I wouldn't be able to tell you exactly, but the goal was simply to bring together very clear statements as to why bilingualism is so important in Canada. We also stress that, since Parliament is a bilingual institution, it is all the more important that its officers be bilingual as well. In a sense, they are the inner workings of Parliament. The idea was also to make things a bit clearer, by explaining what we understand by an officer of Parliament.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: In fact, since you used the words “Whereas the Constitution provides”, I assume that the wording was drawn wholly, or almost wholly, from the Constitution.

My second question has to do with clause 2 and the part that says “without the aid of an interpreter”.

Suppose that an officer of Parliament has an accident and takes a few months off, but he has a hearing problem when he comes back. That can actually happen after an accident. From time to time, he might need an interpreter or a special device. In fact, even with the assistance of an interpreter, he might have trouble understanding certain sounds, which could prevent him from understanding certain words correctly in both his first and second language.

What should we do in a case like that? Should we fire him, although he has all the skills required to keep his position and he still has five years before his mandate expires?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I don't think that applies here. In fact, the key point is understanding the language. Let's say for example that I decided one day to learn Russian. I can now understand the language without the aid of an interpreter, but that does not mean that I wouldn't want to listen to the translation during any given activity to make sure that I fully understood.

In the present case, the fact that a person is able to understand what someone says in French without the aid of an interpreter shows that they understand the language. It is simply a way to determine whether they do.

As I said earlier, that does not mean that the person would never be allowed to use an interpreter in carrying out their duties. The idea is simply to define what “to understand” means.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So you agree that a person could sometimes use an interpreter to make sure they understand a sentence correctly and to not hinder their judgment. Would that be acceptable?

● (1545)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Of course. I don't think that would be a problem.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I would now like to go back to clause 4.

Let's suppose that the same individual is off for three or four months to recover after his accident and that someone else has been appointed in the interim. The position had to be filled given the importance of the duties involved. In many cases, those appointed in the interim work in the same office. They don't necessarily have the same language skills, but they are fully capable of doing the job for three or four months. If the person does not come back or dies, we would have to go through the whole process of appointing a new officer of Parliament.

For an interim appointment, can we have someone who is not as proficient in French, meaning that they meet the requirements for level 2 or 3, but not for level 1?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I think the same criteria should apply. I sincerely believe that there are enough bilingual and competent people in our country. We are talking about 10 positions, not thousands and thousands of positions. In a case like that, of course, there could be major complications. We are talking about 10 very important positions. The people who fill those positions in the interim, even for just three or four months, are already quite competent. When someone is able to be the interim Auditor General of Canada, they must be high up the ladder and they must know that, at some stage, being proficient in both of Canada's official languages is no longer just an asset, but something essential for successfully carrying out all their duties. In my view, that requirement should stay.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: What if it is impossible to find someone like that? Do we eliminate the position or close the office? For instance, in the case of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada where a number of people work, are we supposed to shut down the office for four months?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Those positions have been filled by bilingual people for years. We have had this tradition for a long time. Only recently has a unilingual person been appointed, because we have always managed to find bilingual individuals. Our country has more than 30 million people. So I find it hard to believe that it is impossible to find a bilingual person for the position.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You must be well aware that, when we pass a bill, we have to be prepared for any eventuality. We cannot really afford to create havoc. We need to have a way out. I hope you know that.

I would like to go back to clause 3 and the Governor in Council.

Passing legislation is part of our job as legislators. As a result, we can require appointed officers of Parliament to be bilingual. However, you are basically ready to give officials the same power as that of legislators. Actually, your bill says that 10 officers of Parliament must be bilingual. It is very categorical and you are enabling the Governor in Council to appoint between 20 to 30 other officers, without asking the permission of legislators, of all the members of Parliament. Could you explain that to me? You are taking our duty of making laws away from us and giving it to other people who were not elected by Canadians.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: The idea was to leave the list open. We wanted to make sure that new officers of Parliament could be added. As I said earlier, we are not opposed to Parliament adding them to the list instead of the Governor in Council. We simply

thought this would make the process easier. I really don't think it is a bad thing to add more positions to the list. I don't think it is a problem. The list is created with a specific criterion in mind. We want to make sure that it is easy to add positions if we think other positions should be on the list as well. That does not mean that we are completely opposed to Parliament doing the job.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So you are saying that the Governor in Council can propose to legislators new officers of Parliament who must be bilingual.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, that may be the case.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: He can propose it, but...

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Currently, all those considered to be officers of Parliament are on the list.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Would you want to let legislators, meaning us as members of Parliament, keep the right to add them to the list? That is an important distinction.

● (1550)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I understand and I have no objection to that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would first like to congratulate Ms. Latendresse for this bill, which will certainly improve things.

I would like to go back to your last comment.

Your bill gives the Governor in Council the opportunity to add positions to the list. If I understand correctly, Mr. Gourde is suggesting that the Governor in Council should not have this power, which is in the hands of Parliament. Parliament needs to give the Governor in Council that permission. You seem to be open to that. Is that correct?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I have no major problem with that.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Neither do I.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: We would prefer the Governor in Council to have that role.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Neither do I, but I think it is a good idea if the Governor in Council can add positions to the list.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That is what I think.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: However, it must not have the power to remove positions.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That is right.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I think that is very important.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I agree with you.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: It must not have the power to do so without going through Parliament.

You must know that there is a rating system to assess bilingualism. Level A indicates a beginner's level. Level B indicates an intermediary level and level C indicates an advanced level. Generally, C-B-C is required for the highest level; the first C is for an advanced oral level, the B is for an acceptable writing level, and the second C is for someone who is able to read with no problem. You chose not to refer to that. Is there a reason for that? Saying "without the aid of an interpreter" can in fact be interpreted in a number of ways. If you were to use that rating system, there would be more guarantees. We would have our cake and be able to eat it too.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: We thought about it. We wanted to be sort of more in line with the Official Languages Act and the legislation dealing with federal court judges, which do not have specific criteria either. Their wording is similar. They say that it is important to understand the interpreter and to be able to communicate clearly in both languages. The potential problem with criteria is that they can evolve. A C-B-C level from 20 years ago is probably no longer the same as the one we have today. So we did not want to set criteria like that in the legislation; we said that we would leave it the way it is.

Furthermore, we must not forget that, for each of those positions—as I mentioned a number of times—the appointment is made by the House or the Senate. So those people will appear before the committee. If those people who are supposed to be bilingual come to meet with us, I think we will have an opportunity as parliamentarians to ask them questions and therefore assess their level of bilingualism.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Did you decide to develop a new act right from the start or did you look at the possibility of amending the Official Languages Act?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: We found that there were a number of ways to get to the same result. Amending the act was one of them. We consulted with the law clerks of the House of Commons. We talked about the issue. We were told to proceed in this fashion. An amendment to the Official Languages Act is not really required. We also consulted the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. The commissioner agreed and confirmed that this bill would complement the act without an amendment being required.

Basically, we are talking about two different ways of doing things. Ultimately, our preferred option was the one recommended by the law clerks.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So can you confirm to this committee that your bill does not amend other acts?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: The bill does not amend other acts.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Are you sure?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That is what came out during all the consultations. That is what we were told. I am pretty sure about that.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Okay.

Do I still have time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I would like you to talk about the benefits of your bill for all those bodies, according to the following principle.

[English]

I will say that in English, because why are we speaking only in French about something that will affect both official languages? It's not the right way.

Isn't it true that if the head is not bilingual, the body is in danger of not being bilingual as well? If the commissioner doesn't understand the French language, then the whole system, the whole apparatus will speak only English.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That is very common. When the head of an institution speaks only one of the two languages, all the other people have to adapt and speak that language only. That definitely happens very often and that is what we don't want. We want to promote as much as possible the requirement to understand and speak both languages. Clearly, the best message we can send is when those at the helm of those organizations are able to speak and understand both languages. There is no question about it.

• (1555)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Trottier, you have the floor.

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Latendresse, thank you for appearing before the committee today.

One of the committee's roles is to ask for clarifications about the bill. So I have a few questions about that.

First of all, regarding the wording "without interpreter", did you find other acts or regulations in your research that use this definition of bilingualism?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes. The Official Languages Act uses it. We really drew inspiration from that act, especially the part on the appointment of judges to federal courts. Paragraph 16(1)(c) says to ensure that, "if both English and French are the languages chosen by the parties for proceedings conducted before it in any particular case, every judge or other officer who hears those proceedings is able to understand both languages without the assistance of an interpreter". Our wording is based on that. We thought that, if this works for our federal courts and for the bilingualism requirement for our judges and since the criterion is very similar, it could apply to my bill.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Thank you.

Were there other acts that used the same definition of bilingualism?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, but I don't have them here with me.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: My next question is about the offices. I see that you have basically used masculine language to refer to those positions, such as “*vérificateur*”, “*directeur*” and “*président*” in the French version.

I am guessing that you weren't trying to exclude women.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: No, absolutely not.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Were you advised to use the masculine form only?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: In French, we make a distinction between masculine and feminine, which is clearly not the case in English. At any rate, I think those are simply the official titles and they are also used in each of those acts.

Otherwise, we obviously encourage women as much as possible to apply for positions as officers of Parliament.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Okay.

In addition, the use of capital letters is somewhat random. The word “*commissaire*”, for instance is capitalized in some places, but not in others.

Were you advised by the legislative services as to the correct spelling of those titles?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That is how the word is written in each of those acts. It varies most of the time. That is the reason.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Okay.

In addition, the English and the French are not the same everywhere. The English version says “the Auditor General”, but the French version says “*vérificateur général*” without the article. Once again, was that the advice you received or is it a lack of accuracy? Or perhaps the goal was not to include the masculine and feminine in the title.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: It is possible.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: “*Un ou une commissaire*”, for instance. I don't know.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: It is possible. I wouldn't be able to tell you. I don't think this really changes the procedure. However, harmonizing the English and the French versions further can only help.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: When we pass a piece of legislation, we want it to be perfect.

As for the officers of Parliament, the list includes only 10. Other officers are not mentioned.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Actually, the problem is that there is no clear definition or consensus as to what an officer of Parliament is exactly. The category is not very set or strict. Under those circumstances, we said that the simplest and clearest criterion would be for the position to require an appointment by the House, the Senate or the two Houses. So those are the positions that make up the list.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: I will briefly go to the English version.

[English]

I'm hesitant to see laws changed by orders in council in the sense that this is a law that we're passing and we're putting it before

Parliament. The creation of a new officer of Parliament would be an act of Parliament.

Would it be appropriate, when we create a new officer of Parliament, that at that time we could amend this, if this were to become a law, rather than have orders in council?

● (1600)

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: In fact, the Governor in Council cannot create a new officer of Parliament position; he can only add a position to the list. As I said, adding positions can only be good for us. We want to have as many bilingual positions as possible. In our view, it is not really a problem to have the Governor in Council do that.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: But when we want to change a piece of legislation, would it not be better to do it through Parliament rather than through an order in council?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: If the amendment was specifically to remove some of those positions or to change the aspects inherent to the act, we would obviously have to do that through Parliament. However, Parliament still has the power to amend acts or to create new ones. We don't really need to specify that Parliament can add positions. It already has that right anyway. We simply said that the Governor in Council should be able to add positions if he thought it was a good idea.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Galipeau, you have the floor.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): I listened very attentively to all the questions that have been asked.

Ms. Latendresse, my first comment will be in Russian and has to do with the work you did: *spasibo*.

I would like to continue in the wake of my colleague's questions about the quality of the French in the bill. The English version has a sort of rigour. In fact, the English is consistent from one paragraph to the next. But, that is not the case in the French version. It isn't very serious, but perhaps the people who drafted the bill could look into it. I do not want to make a big deal out of it, but since our role is to defend Canada's official languages, first and foremost, I think the French language should be treated equally.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Absolutely. Obviously, it is important to always be especially careful. There is some consistency with the French and the English. The only thing I see is the absence of articles in French.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Articles are more common in French than in English. The articles aren't there in French, but it is in English.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: It is just a list.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Perhaps dreamers wrote the French version and linguists wrote the English version.

I had another question, but I will let my colleague ask it.

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Congratulations, on your bill, Ms. Latendresse.

I fully agree with my colleague, Mr. Trottier, with respect to the Auditor General title.

I hope you will be flexible. Do you understand that the government supports your bill? It's clear to you, isn't it?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, absolutely. The unanimous vote at second reading sent a clear signal that Parliament as a whole was in favour of the bill.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I am very proud to be part of this consensus. I presume that there will be a few amendments, for the word “vérificatrice”. For example, our government supports this bill with amendments to enable all parliamentarians to work in the official language of their choice. That is the reason behind the support, is it not?

• (1605)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: You are clear on that?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: You believe that, with a few minor changes, you will have our support.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That is how I understand it, and that's a very good thing. Some provisions that affect people appointed on an interim basis are important to keep. It is understood that if amendments need to be made, the spirit of the bill needs to be respected. That is our priority.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Your priority is to preserve the general idea.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: It is essential that the general idea not be diluted by various measures.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: So you are flexible about accepting minor changes.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: For minor changes, yes.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bateman.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Ms. Latendresse, the members would like to know what the word you said in Russian means.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: “*Spasibo*” means thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dionne Labelle, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Latendresse. In the words of Gilles Vigneault, “Aux âmes bien nées, la valeur n'attend point le nombre des années”, which can be translated into English as, “In souls nobly born, valour does not depend upon age.” I would like to congratulate you on this initiative. You know that we share an unconditional love for the poetry of Gilles Vigneault.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Absolutely.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: I am pleased to see that you have taken the initiative for this bill.

In my naivety, when I read the preamble, I notice that it is very important because it reaffirms things that should be obvious in 2013,

both for parliamentarians and for the government machine. If this preamble is there, it is because this did not seem obvious when the Auditor General was chosen.

I would like you to talk about your preamble, particularly the mention of the following:

And whereas persons appointed with the approval by resolution of the Senate, the House of Commons or both Houses of Parliament must be able to communicate with members of those Houses in both official languages.

This passage in the preamble is one that seems important to me, and it is as important to reiterate it today. I am still surprised that the Liberals, who were in power for 20 years, did not manage to add this to a bill, but that is a matter for another debate.

I would like you to tell me about your preamble.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: The purpose of the preamble is to set out why it is important for officers of Parliament to be bilingual. Otherwise, without the preamble, there is just a list of individuals who must be bilingual. We want to underline a fundamental fact, namely that, since Parliament is a bilingual institution, it is essential that the people who form it, in this case the people in the highest positions, be bilingual. That is how it works. We want the message to be clear.

As I mentioned earlier, the definition of an officer of Parliament is not very clear. That is why I think it is truly important that we explain that these are people appointed by the House of Commons or by the Senate. Therefore, a resolution of the House of Commons is necessary. In other words, if there is just a list, it may be difficult to understand why it is exactly these 10 positions that are on it. It is much easier to understand if it is set out in the preamble.

Lastly, I think it is always important to reiterate that English and French have equal status, rights and privileges with respect to their use in Parliament. I think that a number of aspects here are really essential.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: A little earlier, our friends opposite spoke about a lack of consistency between the French and English versions of the bill, but the titles in question were taken from other legislation. But we cannot simply change the terms of other legislation.

I'd like to go back to interim positions. Why did you feel it important that individuals, even if they were in an acting position, be able to express themselves in both official languages?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Even in the case of an interim position, most of the time these people are fulfilling the same duties as someone appointed officially. At the end of the day, it always comes back to the essence of the bill. We feel that it is essential for people to be bilingual if they are in these positions. Again, as I said, we are talking about 10 very high level and very important positions. I am convinced that we can find bilingual individuals capable of properly carrying out these duties, even on an interim basis. It is really important.

• (1610)

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Is language currently part of the criteria in the selection process for officers of Parliament?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Appointing bilingual individuals to these positions is a long-standing tradition. For example, even in the case from last year, when the position was open, bilingualism was indicated as required, not preferable. When you get right down to it, that requirement was not honoured. Perhaps there was a miscommunication somewhere, I do not know. As Mr. Dion mentioned earlier, when unilingual people are in a position of authority, the people who work for them tend to use the language they do.

The Chair: Fine. Thank you.

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I would not criticize Mr. Dionne Labelle in public, but since he took a bit of a mysterious jab at the Liberals, I will say that—

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Here comes the punching bee.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: —the line “Aux âmes bien nées, la valeur n'attend point le nombre des années” is of course not attributed to Gilles Vigneault, but to Corneille. It's from the play *Le Cid*.

[English]

The Chair: Merci.

That was not a point of order; it was a point of information, but it's been noted.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It's a point of privilege.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Madame Latendresse, particularly for your very eloquent opening statement. I now know you're a fan of poetry, and it was evident in your remarks. I particularly liked your description of your bill being one stone in the building of our national Parliament, so hopefully you won't mind our side helping to place that stone to make sure the foundation is strong.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Erin O'Toole: My two questions relate to clauses 3 and 4.

The first is, in your opening remarks and in response to questions from my colleagues, you described the positions as 10 very important ones, and that you were in Saint Boniface or where have you, and people understand those positions. In your opening remarks you also mentioned the fact that language can sometimes be political.

Clause 3 is, as Mr. Trottier referred to, sort of open-ended. It's maybe an order. It is not done in Parliament, so wouldn't you agree that the principles I think you're fighting for would still be fulfilled if that clause were removed?

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I think what's important is to understand that there is no real problem with adding positions to the list.

[English]

There is no problem with adding some of those positions in the event, as I was talking about, there's a new officer of Parliament, for example. That's the reason we put in that provision. We were thinking it could be a good thing to add some positions if something new were to happen.

As we said, if it's Parliament that adds some of those positions, it's not really a problem. It's just that, in our opinion, it's preferable that the Governor in Council be able to add one. If something were to happen, we would want to do it as quickly as possible.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: To Mr. Trottier's point, if a new officer were created through an act of Parliament, could that act not then amend other acts to....? What I'm saying is, if clause 3 were not there, the principles of your bill, I think, would still be met.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, I think it's possible because we could introduce a bill that would set out what it should include. But, would that be done? Could we not simply give the Governor-in-Council the power to add a position if there was an omission? I don't really see what the problem is with the Governor-in-Council having that power. That is why removing it bothers me a little. Why would we want to remove it? What justification is there for not giving the Governor-in-Council that power? I don't understand.

• (1615)

[English]

Mr. Erin O'Toole: My second question relates to clause 4, with respect to an interim appointment. You mentioned that you feel there's a large pool of candidates out there in the event there's a sudden resignation.

Generally I don't like bills that try to predict future scenarios and mandate how a department or a group should react. Building on what Mr. Dion spoke about—the rating system, a candidate with CBC levels—what if somebody at a slightly lower level were a deputy within one of the officer's departments, but didn't meet the appropriate level of bilingualism your bill would recommend? Until that appropriate person was found, would it not be reasonable at least to allow the circumstances for a person who was close to fill the position for an interim period?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: First of all, there is no official level of bilingualism in my bill. That's why we left it open.... As parliamentarians when we are faced with a nomination of an officer of Parliament, we can evaluate them. If the person considers himself or herself to be bilingual, we can ask questions. We can see if the person is bilingual and if he or she meets the requirements.

In the case of an interim officer, if you are qualified enough to be considered to be an interim auditor general, you have to.... You are aware that we are in Canada and that there are two official languages. You can take different measures in order to understand French without the help of an interpreter. I think it's basic.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Michaud.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): First, I would like to thank my colleague, Ms. Latendresse, for being here, and I congratulate her on her excellent work. Because of her, if we can finish this process quickly, we will be able to avoid the unfortunate situation we had with the Auditor General at the start of our mandate. It was an extremely unfortunate situation that upset a lot of people. The government recognized that it was a mistake. Thanks to you and your relentless work, we will be able to avoid this kind of situation in the future. Thank you.

I would like to clarify something regarding clause 3. You suggest that positions can be added to the list only by resolution of the Senate, the House of Commons or both. That is not actually the case; it is following an appointment that has already been approved by parliamentarians. So we may think that parliamentarians, too, would think that the person to be added would be an officer of Parliament. Is that really what you want to establish with this bill?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That's it, which is why the preamble is important to properly understand the various criteria that determine what an officer of Parliament is. We will start out with these 10 positions because they require it right now. As I said, there is no problem with adding more.

Ms. Éline Michaud: On the contrary.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: It's what we want, and we think it's a good thing.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Exactly. The purpose of this bill is to promote bilingualism and show how important it is. Why limit ourselves? On the contrary, we hope that this will snowball. We are seeing that bilingualism is absolutely necessary for an increasing number of positions.

I have one last quick question because I want to leave time for my colleague, Mr. Benskin.

We heard a few objections that Bill C-419 does not take into account the constitutional right of all Canadians and all parliamentarians to address Parliament in the official language of their choice. Unless I'm mistaken, and perhaps you can explain this to me, Bill C-419 ensures that all Canadians and parliamentarians will be served in the language of their choice. Someone who is an officer of Parliament will be able to decide ahead of time what language he or she wants to use for their presentation, but we want to make sure that the person will be able to answer questions and interact with people in the language of the citizens' or parliamentarians' choice. That's the purpose of the bill, isn't it?

• (1620)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That's right. As you said, it strengthens that element because it allows all parliamentarians and Canadians to interact with their Auditor General, with all the officers of Parliament, in the language of their choice, in their mother tongue. It is very important.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Monsieur Benskin.

[Translation]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you.

Congratulations, Ms. Latendresse, for your bill. It's quite interesting.

I will ask my questions in the other official language.

[English]

In regard to clause 2, being able to understand English and French without the aid of an interpreter and to express himself or herself clearly in both official languages, there are many times when any one of these agents will be out meeting organizations or people in public where there will be no translation service and so forth.

Am I to assume, or do I interpret well, when you mention in your bill "without the aid of an interpreter", that their capacity to understand and communicate in both official languages in situations like that is one of the areas you are looking at?

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, it means being able to understand both official languages in all these situations and carrying out their duties. Sometimes they will have to analyze or check certain papers that may have been produced in only one official language. Sometimes the topics may be very delicate. If they had to use a translation, they would lose certain specific elements or nuances that you can only grasp when you understand the language.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

[English]

I think we live in a pretty special country with the two official languages. Over the years since official bilingualism has been in play, I know that, for example, the anglophone community in Quebec, the vast majority of young people under the age of 35 at this point, are fluently bilingual, and float between both cultures quite easily. I'm sure the same type of thing can be said for the francophone community outside of Quebec, being able to speak in their second language as eloquently as their mother tongue.

I think there is clearly a fine pool of potential candidates out there, but what's important about this bill is that it sends a message to young people who are in school and have aspirations of being something like one of these officers.

[Translation]

If you want to be Auditor General, it is better to complete your studies in both languages.

[English]

Would that be a fair assessment of the message?

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, absolutely. I think it sends an excellent message to anyone who aspires to a position at that level. You need to learn both languages; it's really important, not just to be appointed, but because that is what you need to do this job properly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Lastly, Mr. Gourde, you have the floor.

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

Ms. Latendresse, I would like to come back to something you said. You said that, with 30 million Canadians, it should be relatively easy to find people for these positions. That's what you said earlier, right?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: There are a lot of bilingual people, but that is not all. We need to stop opposing skills and bilingualism.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I have another question.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I think that bilingualism is simply an essential skill when it comes to these positions.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: With respect to appointments, we are talking here about the Auditor General of Canada, the Chief Electoral Officer, the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Privacy Commissioner, the Information Commissioner, the Senate Ethics Officer, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, the Commissioner of Lobbying, the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, and the President of the Public Service Commission.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I think these appointments are associated with a lot of experience. I don't think a university educated 20- or 25-year-old can aspire to obtaining one of these positions. It takes more than just education. You need to have worked in various sectors, have acquired experience, have been recognized by your peers as being the best in your field, and so on. So it does in fact limit the possibilities. Out of 30 million Canadians, we are talking about maybe 100 people. In addition, we require these people to speak both official languages.

• (1625)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Yes, a lot of other skills are required but, even for an interim appointment, I am convinced that we can find someone who is bilingual to fill those positions.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: But like I said, it is a little difficult. It is not a pool of 30 million people. It is significantly more limited.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I didn't say that 30 million people could be Auditor General of Canada. It's just that, in Canada, it is possible to find a bilingual individual who can carry out these duties.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Ms. Latendresse, your bill sends a very clear message to future incumbents of these duties. It is clear and unambiguous. If I were your age and aspired to obtaining one of these positions, there is no question that I should be bilingual.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I think that is a good message to send.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Indeed, but studies show that approximately 5% to 7% of Canadians are fully bilingual. Therefore, we risk upsetting 90% to 93% of the Canadian population.

Have you analyzed that? Are you aware that we could do more harm than good?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I sincerely hope that someone who gets to a high enough level to be considered for one of these positions is aware that we live in a bilingual country and that officers of Parliament work in both languages. It is not as if French just

became an official language of Canada. These people are fully aware of the situation. So they can act accordingly.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You said that there were enough Canadians for these positions. Is that your interpretation or is that based on studies that prove that it is, in fact, possible to easily find candidates to fill these positions?

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I don't want to say that it's easy. It certainly isn't the easiest thing in the world, but the reality is that there are more and more people who can speak both languages. I think this type of bill can only encourage the growing number of people to persevere and go further in learning their country's other official language.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So that is your perception. You did not look at the issue in depth, over several hours.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Of course, I studied linguistics, and I have some understanding of the linguistic dynamics. In my opinion, this message can only encourage more people to learn their second official language.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Ms. Latendresse.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

Thank you, Ms. Latendresse.

[English]

Thank you very much for your testimony.

We'll suspend the meeting briefly to allow our next panel of witnesses to join us.

• (1625)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

[Translation]

The Chair: We are continuing the meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Welcome to our witnesses. We have two groups before us. First, we will hear from Ms. Kenny and Ms. Côté, from the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, and then...

[English]

Mr. Thompson and Mr. Shea, from the Quebec Community Groups Network.

We'll begin with an opening statement from

[Translation]

...Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny (President, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and honourable members. Ms. Bossé, who was to accompany me, is not here today. I have with me Diane Côté, our director of government and community relations.

I would like to begin by thanking you for inviting us to testify before you about Bill C-419. It will come as no surprise to anyone here that the federation supports the bill and that we are truly very pleased that all parliamentarians have shown their support of this bill at second reading.

Before I discuss the bill itself, I would like to say that we were surprised that the committee invited us to comment on the bill when we are not aware of the wording of the amendments that will be proposed. Our appearance here today may be our only opportunity to comment on Bill C-419, and obviously we would have preferred to have appeared once the amendments had been tabled. It would have at least been more useful for the committee.

Our comments today will focus in part on what we were able to read in the transcript of the debates held in the House on February 26 with respect to the government's planned amendments.

One of the concerns expressed in these debates has to do with the definition of the required language skills. In that respect, allow me to give you the citizen's point of view. French-speaking Canadians expect to be able to hear the Auditor General speak in French to explain the government's major financial management issues. They expect to be able to speak with the Privacy Commissioner in their own language. In short, the capacity to speak to the public and understand them without using an interpreter is essential. It requires advanced oral and comprehension skills.

I will now comment on the issue of whether the power to add to the list of positions set out in this legislation should come under the Governor in Council or Parliament. This issue is of interest to us because, as you no doubt know, the FCFA has proposed that we eventually add to this list the president of the CRTC and the president of CBC/Radio-Canada, among others. However, if this power to add positions is given to Parliament, it means that each addition will have to be made by amendment to the bill, with the related delays. To be efficient, we therefore feel that this power to add positions should be the responsibility of the Governor in Council.

Lastly, we would like to comment on the issue of people appointed on an acting basis. From our perspective, the language skills set out in Bill C-419 are linked to the positions and remain a constant. Furthermore, you know as well as we do that an acting appointment can last several months before a permanent appointment is made. Therefore, we think that any incumbent of a position set out in Bill C-419, whether that person is appointed on an acting or a permanent basis, must have the language skills required by the position.

Those are our thoughts on the intended amendments that we are aware of. We truly hope that the amendments that are made by this committee will respect the basic principle of the public's right to communicate with officers of Parliament in the language of their choice.

I want to reiterate that we are delighted to see that parliamentarians are united in their support of Bill C-419. Clearly, when you voted in the House, the interests of Canadians were at the heart of your concerns. We hope that it will be the same for this committee.

There are many serious issues facing the francophonie and official languages that deserve this committee's attention.

The FCFA and the organizations in its network hope to work with the committee to advance French and linguistic duality in Canada, but we think it is important that this cooperation be productive and beneficial for everyone. Among other things, that means being able to appear at an appropriate time, at a stage that will enable us to best contribute to the committee's work.

Thank you.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kenny.

I will now turn things over to the Quebec Community Groups Network.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Thompson (Director, Policy, Research and Public Affairs, Quebec Community Groups Network): Good afternoon, Monsieur Chong, Monsieur Dion, Monsieur Godin, and other members of the committee.

With me today is Mr. James Shea, a member of our board of directors who very graciously agreed to come at short notice to help answer questions.

It's a pleasure to be back with you. The last time we were here we were providing testimony for your study on linguistic duality during the 150th anniversary celebrations of Canadian Confederation in 2017. Here we are again talking about a bill that fulfills a duty to a right first pronounced in the Constitution Act, 1867. Section 133 permits English or French to be used by any person in the *Debates* of the Houses of Parliament of Canada, and for both official languages to be used in their respective records and *Journals*.

Over a century later, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms would constitutionally reinforce and expand English and French as Canada's official languages, proclaiming their equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use not only in all institutions of Parliament but also of the Government of Canada.

Parliamentary language rights were established to ensure that the people's representatives could fulfill their duties in French and English so that government could be held to account. It is you, Canada's parliamentarians, who are the focus of these rights, and it is the duty of the institutions of Parliament to ensure that you may fully enjoy them.

Canadians participate directly in their Parliament. For example, I am appearing today at your invitation, and I'm exercising the right to address you in the official language of my choice. I used parliamentary records and *Journals* translated into English to prepare. Later, I will access those same records as a citizen to hold you to account.

But I am not an appointed agent of Parliament. Although subject to its decisions, I am not a servant of this institution. If I were, it would be unacceptable for you to need translation to understand my message to you. The requirement to provide services of equal quality in both official languages is how the institutions of Parliament and the Government of Canada ensure the equality of status and the equal rights and privileges of Canada's two official languages.

The QCGN firmly believes in Bill C-419 and the aim of ensuring that the named agents of Parliament must understand English and French without the aid of an interpreter and be able to express themselves clearly in both official languages. We do not believe that further caveat is required. The appointees enunciated in the bill not only support parliamentarians in their governance of Canada, but are important Canadian public figures and leaders in their own right. They deal with complex issues that require mastery of the two official languages. If this were not the case, then parliamentarians with no or with low second official language skills would not enjoy equality of status, rights, or privileges.

Imagine a Commissioner of Official Languages who could not explain Canada's official languages in English. Imagine a president of the Public Service Commission who couldn't answer questions from a reporter from *Le Devoir* because he or she didn't speak French; a Privacy Commissioner who could not read the concerns expressed in an English editorial; Acadian voters being forced to communicate in English so that the Chief Electoral Officer could understand their concerns.

If a matter is of sufficient importance that Parliament feels compelled to pass legislation and appoint officers of the type listed in Bill C-419, then those officers must be able to communicate to Canadians as clearly in English as in French on their areas of responsibility. If they cannot, either English or French Canadians and their representatives will be left out of important public discussion. This would deny not only the law, but democracy itself.

In short, bilingualism for these positions is not something that would be nice to have; it is a job requirement. Translation, no matter how well it is done, is technical and formal. It can never completely capture nuance, emotion, and meaning. Language skills also affect whom parliamentarians have access to on an informal basis, what conversations they might be a part of, and what ideas they may discover. Isn't this a place where ideas are supposed to be shared?

The Prime Minister's message to preface the road map for Canada's linguistic duality admirably noted that linguistic duality is a cornerstone of our national identity. You don't weaken a cornerstone.

Thank you.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Thompson, for your opening statement.

We'll begin with Monsieur Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank Marie-France Kenny and Diane Côté of the FCFA, and Stephen D. Thompson and James Shea of the QCGN.

[*English*]

It's great to have you here.

We just spoke to the member about why she brought in the bill. Mr. Thompson, I have to make that comment because of the comments you made that they are agents of the Parliament working for Canadians and parliamentarians. This is clear. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you said it doesn't matter which language Canadians speak, English or French, that they have the right to hear these agents of the Parliament in the language of their choice.

Mr. Ferguson, for example, was appointed as the Auditor General. I want to make sure that this has nothing to do with the person himself; we're talking about the position. It's exactly what you have said. When he did his report, on the French channel everything was in English and the francophones got nothing. That's why what you have said is so important. When he had his press conference and they asked him a question in French, he answered in English. It was not translated and nobody in the country got it. That job is important and all Canadians should be able to hear what is said. That's why I appreciate the statement you made.

With that, we see in the bill, "The Governor in Council may, by order, add offices to the list established in section 2". We're talking about the officers of the Parliament. That's what we're talking about, and it's stated in the preamble:

And whereas persons appointed with the approval by resolution of the Senate, the House of Commons or both Houses of Parliament must be able to communicate with members of those Houses in both official languages;

We're talking about those appointments which are done by the Parliament and the Senate. We're not saying that the Governor in Council just does it on his or her own. It says when they're appointed that those persons will be bilingual.

Do you have any problem with doing that through the Governor in Council?

Mr. Stephen Thompson: We take the note that was raised by Mr. O'Toole, and I think Mr. Trottier, when Madame Latendresse was commenting on the bill. The aim of the bill seems clear: to ensure that those agents of Parliament are people who can function in both official languages without translation.

My understanding of the explanation to the question is that should additional agents of Parliament be created, whether or not it's in this act or it's in an enabling section to another act, it—

• (1650)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Let's turn that around and say that we won't give the responsibility to the Governor in Council and we'll leave Parliament to do it. The way the government is run, if a majority government decides to appoint another person, and puts a bill before the House, and doesn't add the person to the list, we will end up with a person who will not be bilingual. That would be more possible than having it done through this bill here and the Governor in Council having the responsibility to put it on the list.

Mr. Stephen Thompson: I would bow to your expertise as a parliamentarian. It would seem to me that the Governor in Council is not as accountable to Parliament as parliamentarians are to themselves. If a bill were to pass the House where a position was created that didn't have the proviso of the need to be bilingual, is that more or less accountable than if it's done by an order in council? I don't know that. It's a technical question.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Ms. Kenny, my question has to do with the Governor in Council. The bill already states that the Governor in Council may add someone. Currently, the Governor in Council can appoint officers of Parliament, and appointments are then approved by the House and the Senate. That is how the legislation currently stands. People are appointed by the Governor in Council, and appointments are then approved by Parliament.

Mr. Thompson, if we take that out, do you not think we could end up having a majority government put forward a bill to add a new officer of Parliament, but the government would not add the position to the list because the position is not included in the current bill?

The first thing the Governor in Council must do when an officer of Parliament is appointed is to appoint someone bilingual, then the appointment is approved by Parliament. Parliament will not be able to refuse a bilingual person because the legislation already stipulates that the person must be bilingual.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I would simply like to ask a question to get some clarification. Mr. Godin, are you asking me if it is better to have Parliament make the appointment? I don't understand the question.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Currently, the Governor in Council has the power to appoint officers of Parliament.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: He has that power. It is written here that he would also have the power to add to the list. He cannot remove positions from the list, but he can add them.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Yvon Godin: If we remove that provision, only Parliament will be able to list new positions, but if there is a majority government, the exact opposite could happen.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: That's right. If I may, I would add that the process could be very long as well because, unless I'm mistaken, an amendment would have to be made to the act to add names. If the act already sets out that the Governor in Council can appoint someone, the process will be quicker.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

Clause 4 reads as follows:

In the event of the absence or incapacity of the incumbent of any of the offices listed in section 2 or vacancy in any of these offices, the person appointed in the interim must meet the requirements set out in section 2.

What is your position on that?

As you said, you have not been asked to appear after the amendments, but I think that's normal. When we are studying a bill, we invite people and, afterwards when we are in camera, we do a clause-by-clause study, and amendments are put forward. Moreover,

based on what the government says in the House, we can expect amendments.

We heard from witnesses earlier. There are 30 million people in Canada and we should be able to find someone. Even among people who work for the Commissioner or the Auditor General, there must be some bilingual individuals. I would like to know what you think about people in acting positions. Should they be bilingual? Do you accept that for two, three or six months, Canadians should be deprived of a bilingual individual if the person appointed on an interim basis is not?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Be brief, Ms. Kenny.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: We are concerned about this, as well. It is important to remember that the position, and not the person, is designated bilingual. If the position is designated bilingual, it is designated bilingual, whether the position is being filled on an interim basis or permanently. The obligations are the same. Managers must serve their staff and, when they are in a position permanently or on an acting basis, they have to speak to Canadians and clients. The designation remains the same.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you.

Before I give the floor to Mr. Trottier, I would like to mention that the bells will start to ring at 5:15 p.m., but the vote will begin at 5:45 p.m. Therefore, our meeting will go until 5:30 p.m. because it doesn't take 15 minutes to walk to the House of Commons.

[English]

Okay, so we'll sit until 5:30, and we'll continue with Mr. Trottier.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to talk about the list of positions. I want to point out something interesting. There are 10 positions, but only eight of them are officers of Parliament. I don't know if you are aware of that, but the first eight are officers of Parliament, but the other two, the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner and the President of the Public Service are not officers of Parliament. That might be why the words "officers of Parliament" do not appear in this bill. I think it is important to be clear because this is legislation we are working on.

The bill has not yet been adopted and we are already talking about names. My question is for both groups. The list isn't limited to officers of Parliament. In this case, are we running a risk if we are adding more and more positions? Obviously, there are already two positions that are not officers of Parliament. I would like your comments on this because, Ms. Kenny, during your presentation, you spoke about the president of the CRTC and the president and CEO of CBC/Radio-Canada. Perhaps there are other positions we are thinking of that are not officers of Parliament.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I don't think there's a risk. I think the Governor in Council is in a position to make good choices and to designate new positions. I don't think designating a position bilingual is a risk. The risk would be not to designate a position bilingual. Names could be added to the list, if appropriate, absolutely. The danger would be in removing positions when we live in a bilingual country.

In my opinion, there is an obligation to serve the public and speak to the public in the language of their choice. I'm talking about key positions in the government, if we don't want to use the term officer of Parliament. These positions are ultimately there for the public. Perhaps I'm in my own little bubble, but I think the Auditor General works for me, and for Mr. Thompson. It is important to remember that.

I don't think it's a risk to add names. The risk is not having enough of them.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Before you reply, Mr. Thompson, I would like to clarify one point.

What we risk is government by order in council. When we want to change legislation, it has to be submitted to Parliament. That is why I am asking the question. I am told that additions could be made to the list through an order in council. We need to be able to hold a debate in Parliament to determine whether it is really necessary for the incumbent to be bilingual, whether the position really requires it. I am thinking for instance of the head of the RCMP.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Mr. Trottier, I have never seen a case where it was deemed unnecessary to staff a position designated as bilingual with a bilingual person. In my opinion, if the governor in council thinks that a position should be designated bilingual, it is because it has done its homework. May I point out that it is somewhat more difficult to get a position staffed by a bilingual person than it is to have a unilingual person become the incumbent. Within this Parliament and the succession of those we have seen since the implementation of the Official Languages Act, it has always been difficult to have a bilingual person appointed to certain key positions.

Consequently, if the governor in council says that the person must be bilingual, it is because it has done its work. I do not think that a government would randomly decide to designate positions as bilingual without a valid reason.

However, if we wait and if we have to have the legislation amended every time, it is going to take forever to have bilingual people appointed to designated bilingual positions.

[English]

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Thompson or Mr. Shea.

Mr. James Shea (Member, Board of Directors, Quebec Community Groups Network): It's clear that if there are going to be additional positions, then within the spirit of the law, truly they should be bilingual, as we have stated from the beginning. That's our position.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Do you have any thoughts on whether it should take the Governor in Council or an act of Parliament to change the list?

Mr. James Shea: That's a procedure with which I'm not totally familiar, so I guess I would leave it to your table to answer that.

• (1700)

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Okay, thank you.

That's all I have.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I would like to thank both groups of witnesses.

[English]

Thank you so much for being here with us.

[Translation]

My question is somewhat on the same topic.

In the second paragraph, after the word « Whereas », they refer to [English]

“the institutions of Parliament”.

[Translation]

In the fourth paragraph, after the word « Whereas », they talk about

[English]

“persons appointed with the approval by resolution of the Senate, the House of Commons or both Houses of Parliament...”.

[Translation]

So there is something vague there. As was just pointed out, the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner and the president of the Public Service Commission are not really institutions of Parliament. The public service is not either. It is part of the executive branch.

Ms. Kenny, you suggest that the chair of the CRTC and the president of the CBC be added to the list, and they are clearly not agents of Parliament. They would be very surprised to be told that they were, and everyone else would be as well.

Does this vagueness bother you? Are you suggesting that these matters be clarified, or, on the contrary, do you think that this is a creative vagueness? I am putting my question to both groups.

[English]

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Do you want to tackle that one first?

Mr. Stephen Thompson: It's a creative level of vagueness.

I think big ideas are often legislated in vague terms. The Constitution Act, 1982 was not specific in a number of things. That's why we have the Supreme Court. It's why the law develops and it's why the law is flexible. Flexibility is something that certainly characterizes the Canadian discussion.

The principle that the bill represents, that parliamentarians have a right to work in English and French, and that English and French have equality in their use in this institution, is what we support. That supports linguistic duality. The QCGN is behind that. Anything that expands upon that is a good thing. Anything that is retrograde from that is a bad thing. It's a pretty simple position.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I see.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I agree completely with what my colleague has just said. The idea is to ensure, in a bilingual country like ours, that representation in Parliament is increasingly bilingual. The scope must not be narrowed, but rather, broadened. If to achieve that we have to maintain this creative vagueness, well then, so be it. The idea is to ensure that we meet the needs better and better. As I said before, I am happy about that.

Government follows government, term after term, and generally, parliamentarians do not agree on broad principles. But in this case, I was literally jumping for joy in my living room when I found out that they agreed on the principles of this bill.

In fact, I must congratulate you on that.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: We are all going to accept the congratulations. Thank you very much.

Concerning the chairs of the CRTC and CBC, is it conceivable that they not be bilingual? Do we really need a law? You are going to answer yes because there is an unfortunate precedent with the Auditor General. That is probably what is going to shape your reply, but I would like to hear from both of you, Mr. Thompson and Ms. Kenny.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I am to appear soon before the CRTC. I want to be understood by the chair of the CRTC. The chair of the CRTC, who explains decisions to Canadians, must do so in both languages. By the same token, if the president of our national English- and French-language broadcaster could not communicate in both official languages, to me that would be absurd. I would not want him to speak only French, either. I expect him or her not to be a unilingual English-speaker, to be able to communicate orally in both languages, and to make himself understood by Canadian citizens.

The appointment of the last Auditor General is absurd. It seemed self-evident to me that they were going to appoint a bilingual person. In saying that, I do not wish to detract in any way from Mr. Ferguson's other competencies.

● (1705)

[English]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Thompson or Mr. Shea.

Mr. James Shea: Well, I think the principle of that is very clear with our position, that senior positions be bilingual. Personally, I think Radio-Canada/CBC is truly Canada, so I would like to find a reason why it would not be a bilingual position.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you very much.

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

[English]

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Thank you very much to the witnesses for appearing in front of the committee.

I would like to ask you a question about Bill C-419. What, in your opinion, is the necessity of introducing this bill? It should be something natural in our country. We are a bilingual country. Why do we need additional bills when we have these rights in the Constitution and so on?

Maybe you could tell me why, in your opinion, this bill needed to be introduced, and it is a good one; I'm not telling you that it's not a good one.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I'll answer that one in English. I'm a translator, but as my colleague said, as good as translators are, it never does justice to the person or the emotion.

I would like to believe that it's not necessary. I would. I sincerely would. Until we had the nomination of a unilingual general...a *vérificateur général*—

[Translation]

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: You are talking about the Auditor General.

[English]

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I'm a translator, but I couldn't figure out that word.

For me, it just made common sense that the person would be bilingual. So what is the risk, then, in terms of trying to find the next person, and then creating an interim...? We have that risk. It happened. I'm still without an auditor general who can speak to me in my language during a French interview on Radio-Canada. I'm still without that a year and a half later.

For me, it just makes common sense, I agree; but we ran into this. It happened.

If it's not in a law, what's my guarantee that it won't happen again for another key position, and another one? Governments change and things happen. As good as all our intentions are here, what's to say that it won't happen again 10 years down the road?

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: I'm bilingual, not in French and English, but in different languages, and I know what it means. You will never, ever be perfectly proficient in the two languages. I can tell you that my mother tongue is a different language, and I'm not proficient in my mother tongue.

Do people in our country have the opportunity to improve their language skills? Take the *vérificateur général*; can he improve his skills? If he doesn't perform in a language at a certain level, you should say, "Thank you very much and goodbye. Unfortunately, your services are not required anymore."

Should we give him the chance to learn to speak the other language?

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: We're not asking for perfection. I'm fluent in four languages, including English and French, and I think my English is pretty good, although I couldn't say "auditor" two minutes ago.

We're not asking for perfection. I want to be able to understand, I want to be able to be understood. That's all we're asking.

There is a difference between starting from scratch and trying to build. I was in charge of language training for a federal crown corporation. It doesn't take a year. When you have a key position within government, your learning curve is very high and very steep without the language, so imagine adding a language.

You can't learn a language in one year. It's hard to do even full time so imagine when it's only a fraction of your time. I think these are unrealistic expectations. I think we put very high demands on Mr. Ferguson by putting him in that position, and I don't think it was fair to him or to the Canadian population.

• (1710)

Mr. Stephen Thompson: I think we called for something a little stronger. I think linguistic duality is a core value, or it is not.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Absolutely.

Mr. Stephen Thompson: If it is a core value then it is a job requirement to be able to speak in both of Canada's official languages without the aid of an interpreter to do your job. That's it.

It's not about getting along; it's not about being able to say "hello"; it's not about being able to communicate at a basic oral level at a cocktail party. For people at the positions listed in the bill, it's the ability to listen, to read, to understand the academic work that's coming out in your field of specialization in both official languages from all the Canadian universities and beyond. It's to be able to be a leader in your field at those levels, and you can't do that unless you have a fairly integral grasp of the other official language.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Thank you, Madame Kenny. Your response to some of the questions and your presentation raised a new question.

The federal civil service does language assessments in the development of its leaders. We talked earlier about scores in proficiency levels whether it's A, B, C, and in the past they were numeric. Should that not be hard-baked right into this law?

Instead of a reference to someone who can understand without the assistance of an interpreter, which is currently in the bill, should we not bake in the federal government's own proficiency standards to assess the level required for the 10 positions?

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I'll speak from experience as a person responsible for official languages and language training in a crown corporation that is not subjected to the CBC levels. We had our own rating level.

What's important here is whether you can perform your job in both official languages. If I were hiring an IT person, my interview with this person would be strictly IT based. I would pretend I was a caller calling to get information from the help desk. I needed help with something. If the person couldn't answer in both official languages, then they were not at the proficiency level that we wanted. We want advanced level, not expert, which is equivalent, I believe, to the C level within the public service.

We're not asking for somebody....You know, I make mistakes when I speak English. I still do interviews in English, and people still understand me. It's the ability to be understood and to understand. I still say "air" instead of "hair", but people understand when I speak, and that's what we're asking. That, I believe, requires the C proficiency level.

Should it be built in? If you think it's necessary, but at the very minimum we should say that they should be advanced in their own field of expertise. If we're looking for an auditor general, they should be able to explain processes and whatever in both official languages.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Many candidates I would imagine for the 10 positions.... As Mr. Trottier specified, some of the positions are not technically officers of Parliament, but many of those people would be coming from within the civil service. Some might already have a language profile, but any candidate would be required to meet the CCC profile.

Would your group find that to be an acceptable measure within the bill for the 10 positions?

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: If they are at the C level, I think that's totally acceptable. That's what we're looking for, somebody who can converse in their field of expertise in both official languages, somebody who can understand in both official languages in their field of expertise at the C level, advanced.

Mr. Stephen Thompson: Our position on that would be to ask what benefit it would be to get managerial in an act of Parliament. What you're trying to do here is operationalize a value, which is linguistic duality. By putting a specific limit on it, what you're in effect saying is that you're limiting the value. We're saying that this is a core Canadian value, but only this much. I'm not sure how useful that is. The language now used in the bill, which speaks of being able to function without an interpreter, is broad enough that it gives you some flexibility in implementation. If you want to get managerial and specific, maybe that would be a question of implementation and regulation. I'm not sure it's best placed in the legislation itself.

•(1715)

Mr. Erin O'Toole: The reason I asked is that during my years in the military, for promotion to certain levels there was a language requirement and a requirement to keep that current. I just wonder why in a piece of federal legislation dealing with our federal Parliament we would not consider using the federal standard that assesses competency in the two languages. I am interested in your feedback.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: The principle is good and I approve what Mr. Thompson says in principle, but in reality, perhaps none of us will be sitting here in 10 years. People will then be able to interpret this as they wish, by reducing the necessary language competency level. I want to ensure that there is a minimum threshold.

You are correct when you say that we should at least require that. All the better if the person's skills are above the minimum level, but we have to maintain one. I am in agreement with what Mr. Thompson said in principle, but I am afraid that there may be a tendency to do as little as possible all the time, because the governments that followed each other in the past did not demand a minimum level. Let's shoot for the moon and ask for the C skill level, at the very least, that is, the advanced level.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

There is some interesting discussion going on, but I'm going to touch first on the issue of the temporary position, when the agent leaves, resigns and so forth, and there is an interim period. I would like to share my feeling with you and invite comments. I feel that, whether it's an interim position or not—and I think you said it best, Ms. Kenny—it's the position itself that holds the proficiency and not the individual. If that individual, interim or not, cannot hold that proficiency then, for that period of time, Canadians and the people who work for that agency are getting less than they should be getting until they find someone to fill that position.

Would that be an accurate—

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Currently, the Official Languages Act regulations stipulate that when a designated bilingual position is staffed on an acting basis, the person must have the language skills required by the position. I don't see why it should be any different for key positions in the government and for the agents of Parliament. I feel that the requirements should be the same, whether the person is there in an acting capacity or not.

Why should we accept less, when we do not for other positions in the government? If the Official Languages Act regulations apply to all positions within the government, they should also apply to key positions in the government.

[English]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Because I have only five minutes, I'll jump over to what we were talking about, the proficiency levels. Any kind

of grading system is a subjective thing, from elementary school right through to job applications.

My concern about adding a very specific measure in the law is that it will not account for any progress that may be made in the future in terms of language proficiency, skills, and expectations. As the country becomes more and more bilingual, one would hope and expect there would be a higher level of expectation of language proficiency—oral, written, comprehension, interpretation, and there might be something else added.

My fear in adding a limit is that the limit very quickly becomes a lower limit for what is available out there.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: I'd say that after the advanced level there are the semi-professional and professional levels—at least, they were where I used to work—and those were reserved for communications people who had to be extremely...and linguists. I'm not expecting an auditor general, or someone at CBC/Radio-Canada, or a

•(1720)

[Translation]

The Chief Electoral Officer of Canada has to have a professional language level in both French and English. We want him to be comprehensible. In the wake of this bill, there will be a gradual evolution. I dare hope that if one day everyone in our society speaks the language at a professional level, we will ask the same of the agents of Parliament. When I listen to the news, I don't expect to hear extremely elevated discourse, but I do expect to understand what the person is saying. I think that the advanced level is the minimum level that should be required. If we find someone who has a professional level of competency, all the better, but if he or she has an advanced level, I will be able to understand them, as will everyone else.

[English]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Could I get a quick response to the same question from Mr. Thompson as well?

Mr. Stephen Thompson: For the managerial question of what level, CCB, BCB, A, or whatever it is, the principle is for you, the parliamentarians, to have equal access to the individual in question. When you're in the cafeteria, does that person feel completely comfortable coming up and sitting at your table? At parties, can you converse with and share ideas with that person?

That's the level of bilingualism we're talking about. It's access for you, the people's representatives, to the agents or the officers listed in this bill, so that you can have equal access to them and ensure equality of status of the two languages.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The last intervention for today, before we consider the other business that we need to deal with administratively, goes to Monsieur Gourde.

[Translation]

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

I want to welcome all of the witnesses.

Ms. Kenny, since you are a translator, I think that you are just the right person to answer my question. I think it is important that the people appointed to these positions be able to read, understand and speak both official languages properly. We all think that. However, in clause 2 of the bill, the following words are used: « without the aid of an interpreter ». As you said, it takes years to learn a language, and more years again to master a second language. If you do not understand a word or you understand more or less, you can ask for the help of an interpreter to make sure you understand a sentence correctly and can make the right decision afterwards.

If we leave that text intact, are we going to have to ask the agent of Parliament to resign if he or she needs an interpreter from time to time in order to understand some expression properly?

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: There is a difference, Mr. Gourde, between needing the services of an interpreter and needing those of a translator. If I am not sure about the meaning or the use of a word, I will turn to a colleague, naturally. There is a difference between that and being shadowed by an interpreter who translates everything, or being forced to listen to an interview in English with subtitles in French or through the voice of an interpreter who may not render certain nuances. In saying this I am absolutely not criticizing interpreters for whom I have the utmost respect, but they can't do justice to everything. You may have noticed that sometimes before this committee when I become very passionate, I answer in English, and that is why. I know that the role of the interpreter is not to translate my emotion, my passion or my anxiety.

To my way of thinking, we are not talking about the same thing at all. The words « without the aid of an interpreter » mean that the person can get along. If he says « uh » and can't find a word or uses an English word during his interview, that is acceptable. In fact, I do that myself. The words « without the aid of an interpreter » mean that there is no obligation to have an interpreter present all the time who translates everything that is being said.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: As you say, we can go from one language to the other. If you do not find the ideal word in French, you say it in English.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Yes, but that must not happen every second word; it should be occasional, as needed. It has happened to me to look for the word « essuie-glace ». I said « my wipers ». We understand each other.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So you are indulgent in the case of the odd memory lapse.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Yes I am, because we do not expect perfection, and that it is not the objective. If that were the goal, none of us could ever occupy any of these positions. No one on earth could occupy them.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: These are high-level positions, you will agree. No one wants to have to take special university training to be able to occupy one of these ten positions. It is because of the broad experience of a lifetime, because of the skills acquired, that someone may one day, at a certain age, be appointed to one of these positions. Do you share that point of view?

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Yes.

I was of course bilingual, since I was a translator. If someone wants to have a career in a government department or agency or aspires to a position in the upper echelons of the public service, like that of the Auditor General, they should be bilingual, as our young people know as of high school. If you have a certain career plan, you have to see certain things coming and act accordingly.

It's the same thing when I hear about the difficulty of recruiting bilingual people. When I was in Saskatchewan, we recruited bilingual auditors and bilingual audit directors. These people exist; you simply have to take the trouble to look for them.

Of course, if I am looking for a bilingual chartered accountant in Bellegarde, I may not find any; but if I broaden my search to all of Saskatchewan, I will find some. The point is that you have to do a serious search. You can turn to the services of headhunters, for instance. Sometimes that option seems very expensive, but it is less expensive by far than having to train someone for two years.

● (1725)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If someone is named on an acting basis for two or three months, and it proves really difficult—or impossible—to find a bilingual person, would it be better to close the Office of the Auditor General for three months, or to hire a unilingual person on an acting basis while waiting for the new appointment?

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: You cannot close that office, but do you not think that there would be someone already in the organization who is bilingual, knows the work, and could staff the position on an acting basis?

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Would that be in another position? I was asking you whether...

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: We are talking about any other position.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I think that we are all people of good will here, as you indeed said in your presentation.

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Yes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If that were the case, would it be preferable to close an office or a department, or, if nothing else were possible, to accept a unilingual person in an acting capacity?

Ms. Marie-France Kenny: Mr. Gourde, I remain convinced that someone could be found, whatever the position. I am sincerely convinced that if the official languages commissioner were no longer there tomorrow morning, we could appoint a bilingual person from the Office of the Commissioner to ensure the position was staffed during two or three months, without having to shut down the position. Where there's a will, there's a way. I became aware of this because I was often told also that it would be hard to find someone.

The Chair: Thank you.

I thank the witnesses for being here.

We need to adopt a budget for the study of Bill C-419.

[English]

You have a projected budget in front of you in the amount of \$3,900.

Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: I move that we approve the \$3,900, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. O'Toole has moved that we adopt the budget in the amount of \$3,900 for the study of this bill.

On a point of order, Madame Bateman.

[Translation]

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I have a point of order. I would like us to use tools such as videoconferencing in order to reduce costs. This is the new standard for the federal government. It should be the same thing here, if possible.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Of course, sometimes it is not possible, but videoconferencing is a good idea.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you for that point of debate. I appreciate that. In fact, I believe that the Commissioner of Official Languages, who is our next witness to appear at our next meeting, for scheduling reasons will be making his appearance via video conference.

Is there further debate on this motion in front of us?

Mr. Yvon Godin: I just wanted to say that the information I received.... Are you talking about Skype?

[Translation]

Ms. Joyce Bateman: No, I am talking about videoconferences. We have equipment, tools...

Mr. Yvon Godin: I am thinking about the other witnesses we still have to hear. I think that the Commissioner of Official Languages is another witness, but are there others as well?

The Chair: He is the last witness.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I don't think we want to hear his testimony via videoconference.

[English]

The Chair: He's appearing via video conference because he cannot make an appearance in person. His schedule would not permit it.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Oh! We did not know.

[English]

The Chair: Okay?

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, that's fine.

The Chair: Is there further debate on this motion?

Seeing none, I'll call the question.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Without further ado, this meeting is adjourned.

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