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• (1715)

[Translation]

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

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 24 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[English]

Today's meeting is in a hybrid format. Members will attend in person or with the Zoom application.

[Translation]

In light of the recommendations from health authorities regarding the pandemic, all those attending the meeting in person should follow the directives of the Board of Internal Economy.

I thank the members in advance for their cooperation.

[English]

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me. Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motions adopted by the committee on Monday, April 25 and Monday, May 2, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on the importance of official languages at Canadian National.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

[English]

Welcome to Ms. Tracy Robinson, president and chief executive officer for Canadian National Railway Company; and Mr. Sean Finn, executive vice-president, corporate services and chief legal officer.

[Translation]

Before turning the floor over to the witnesses, I would like to apologize to them: we are starting the meeting late because there were a number of votes in the House, which is not a frequent occurrence. We were supposed to adjourn at 5:30 p.m., but the members have agreed to continue until 6:00 p.m.

Ms. Robinson and Mr. Finn, since you are attending virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either Floor, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. Please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. When speaking, do as I do and speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mic should be on mute.

[English]

Ms. Robinson, you will be given a maximum of five minutes for your remarks, after which we will proceed to our rounds of questions.

I will signal when you have approximately one minute left.

[Translation]

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

• (1720)

Ms. Tracy Robinson (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian National Railway Company): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, honourable members of the committee.

My name is Tracy Robinson, and I am president of Canadian National, or CN. I am accompanied by Sean Finn.

Thank you for inviting us to take part in this important discussion before the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

I've been taking courses to improve my French since joining CN three months ago. This is one of my priorities. I'm eager to become an active member of the Montreal community.

[English]

CN is an important facilitator of trade, being the only North American railway to connect the east and west coasts of Canada to the southern United States. We're proud to have had our head office in Montreal for more than a hundred years and proud of the fact that, since our privatization in 1995, CN continues to be governed by the Official Languages Act.

[*Translation*]

We are proud of the rich history of Quebec, where the official and common language is French.

[*English*]

We take our responsibility towards French very seriously and strive to provide our employees, our customers and our stakeholders with the ability to communicate with us in both official languages. We understand both the responsibility and the opportunity in supporting the French language. We appreciate the feedback that we receive on areas where we may fall short. It gives us the opportunity to continue to improve.

In this spirit, I've asked Mr. Finn to carry out a detailed review of our language practices and policies, and I've retained the services of the Lavery de Billy law firm to conduct an independent, third party assessment of our practices and provide me with recommendations for improvement. This advice will inform our ongoing work to ensure that we continue to fulfill our responsibilities.

While CN has operations across the continent, I am located in Montreal, and I've moved here from western Canada. My senior executive team is located in Montreal as well. Nearly two-thirds of the CN executives across our North American network and 90% of our executives in Quebec speak French.

[*Translation*]

Since Canadian National was privatized, we have had several francophone CEOs: Paul Tellier, Claude Mongeau, Luc Jobin and Jean-Jacques Ruest.

At CN, all employees may use the official language of their choice and receive all communications from CN in that language.

The public can access our information line, where bilingual representatives will answer their questions and respond to their concerns.

[*English*]

For us, engaging with our customers and the communities across our network in the official language of their choice is not a burden but a competitive advantage

[*Translation*]

CN's board of directors respects the company's rich history in Quebec and views it with great pride.

[*English*]

CN has a long history of Quebec-based francophone representation on our board of directors. On January 25 we announced the appointment of the Honourable Jean Charest as a director. Monsieur Charest resigned on April 1. We regret that these timelines did not allow for a process to select a French-speaking candidate from Quebec in time for our May AGM. However, at the first meeting of CN's board of directors following the resignation of Monsieur Charest, the board announced that it had taken steps to appoint a French-speaking director from Quebec.

[*Translation*]

The board will appoint that person as soon as possible.

The search for a candidate is ongoing, and we are determined to deliver on our commitment.

Members of the committee, I am firmly committed to promoting a place of business and work in which the French language is strong and respected.

[*English*]

We are committed to meeting all of our obligations with respect to Canada's official languages. CN is very proud of our rich history in Quebec. We welcome and embrace our responsibility towards our employees and the community.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your attention.

Mr. Finn and I will be pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Robinson.

We will begin the first round of questions with the first vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, Joël Godin.

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

• (1725)

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

Ms. Robinson, thank you for being with us today. We apologize for our late start.

I want to congratulate you on your efforts to learn French. You are clearly more capable of adapting and learning than some CEOs we have met here.

Ms. Robinson, I understand you've been in your position for only a few months. So we can understand why you haven't necessarily established your philosophy throughout the business. However, I'd like to remind you that, in November 1962, 60 years ago this year, a federal parliamentary committee on railways asked Donald Gordon, then president of Canadian National, to explain why there were no francophones among the Crown corporation's 17 vice-presidents.

Sixty years later, why do you think CN is back at square one? Actually, why do you think the company is making the same mistake? The official languages are of course English and French. Why do you think we're seeing a repeat of that same situation?

Admittedly, we're probably more sensitive to the cause of French as a result of current events because we're studying the official languages modernization bill.

I'd like to hear what you have to say about CN past and present.

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the member for his question.

[English]

Although I cannot speak to the CN of many years ago, I can say that, as I come into this company now, I observe a great deal of respect and support for the French language, both here in Quebec and across our system. I don't know about the French-speaking nature or the ability of members of the past in CN to speak French. I can tell you that, as I come into this company, as I said, 90% of the executives here in Quebec who sit around me every day speak French, and they do so quite actively in the office around me every day, which I appreciate. Almost two-thirds of our executives across North America speak French as well. I think this is a strong statement about the importance our company places in supporting the French language.

[Translation]

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

You said in your opening statement that you were going to take steps to appoint a francophone director to your board as soon as possible.

What do you mean by “as soon as possible”?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Immediately upon the resignation of Monsieur Charest from our board of directors, the board announced its intention to initiate a process to evaluate what has turned out to be a great number of qualified francophone director candidates located in Quebec and to choose the appropriate candidate to join us on our board.

That process is under way. They are reviewing the large number of candidates that have been brought forth. I believe that very shortly, within the next very short period of time, we will be making an announcement around the addition to our board of a francophone, Quebec-based representative.

[Translation]

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

I'd like to hear a more precise timeline.

Are you planning to do so in the next month, the next six months or the next year?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: I expect a meeting with the search firm on Monday. This is a priority for me. It's a priority for our board. I would expect that this will be weeks, not years.

[Translation]

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

I have a question about CN's governance manual. Does your manual state that the board has adopted a target of at least 50% of independent directors from a broad range of diverse groups, such as women, indigenous people, visible minorities and persons with disabilities? It says nothing about the percentage of francophones relative to that of anglophones.

I hope that francophones aren't considered one of the diverse communities or a minority.

I'd like to hear what you have to say on the subject.

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: CN has a long history of having francophone representation on our board of directors. It is a practice that's important to us. It's important to our board of directors. It's important to me and it's one where I think we have established a long track record.

We find ourselves in a position now that, for a very short period of time, we are without a francophone, Quebec-based member of the board. We've taken some action to rectify that very quickly.

● (1730)

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Will you make a commitment to this committee that you will change CN's policy to ensure the presence of French?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: French is a part of our practice under the Official Languages Act in this company every day. We are one of a rare number of federal, private companies that are subject to the Official Languages Act, so this is a commitment we take very seriously and observe very closely. It's an active part of the way that we do business every day.

As I've said, when it comes to the board of directors, we've had a long history of francophone representation. We're in a very brief period of time where we don't have a member, and we are very actively addressing that now as a priority.

[Translation]

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

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Robinson.

That's all the time we have, Mr. Godin. I know six minutes go by quickly.

Francis Drouin and Patricia Lattanzio will share the next six minutes. We will begin with Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Drouin, the floor is yours.

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

I want to thank the witnesses who are with us.

I won't be asking any questions, but I will be sharing my time with Ms. Lattanzio. Very briefly, I want to get the lay of the land because I'm not physically present. I wonder if my colleagues would agree with me that we should instruct our whips to see if we can add a little more time to our schedule over the next few weeks since it's voting time. I just want us to have more time to spend on our studies so we don't wind up in the same situation we're in today. I'll side with them if they don't agree. I'm not trying to start a debate today.

The Chair: You mean the whips of the respective parties.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Yes, exactly.

The Chair: Does the committee authorize our whips to add more hours before the end of the session?

Is that correct?

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, as we all remember, in a recent discussion, all the members of this committee were willing to add hours to their schedule. We did so again today by adding half an hour, but we're planning to add more time in order to consider Bill C-13.

Consequently, I don't understand my colleague's remarks.

The Chair: Having previously discussed this, I think the committee has to authorize the whips to do so when it wants to add more hours to the schedule.

Do we have unanimous consent for the whips to see if this can be done?

Shall we authorize them to sit down and see if it's possible?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): We can take a look at what's possible. At the same time, I don't think there's any reason to precipitate matters. We have to take the time to conduct our study properly.

The Chair: If we add more hours for our study, is that fine with you?

All right. Thank you.

Mr. Drouin, as I understand it...

Yes, Mr. Godin, you wanted to add a comment.

Mr. Joël Godin: With regard to additional hours, Mr. Chair, as you know, as parliamentarians, we're caught up in the end-of-session whirlwind. We all have responsibilities and we have commitments outside this committee. Consequently, I want to explore the possibility of extending our schedule, but I'm not prepared to add 10 hours a week.

I think it's premature to establish that mandate. Perhaps we should determine a clearer mandate.

The Chair: The whips will probably agree amongst themselves and come back to us with an answer after sounding out their parties.

Do we agree that we have consent on this matter, that our whips may get together and determine whether it's possible to add some hours between now and the end of this session?

Yes? Then we have unanimous consent.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: At any event, I want to take time to look at this. We'll discuss it and then see what happens.

The Chair: Great.

Ms. Lattanzio, you have three and a half minutes left.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I wanted to ask a question.

Will the time my colleague used to discuss additional hours be subtracted from my speaking time? He addressed a procedural matter concerning all members of the committee. I'd also like to be able to ask my questions.

The Chair: I apologize Ms. Lattanzio. You're absolutely right.

You have six minutes.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you, Ms. Robinson, for being present today. I have a couple questions.

Are French-language courses and lessons offered to your senior executives and board members? If so, are they mandatory? Are they expected to follow them?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Thank you for your question, Ms. Lattanzio.

[*English*]

Right now, as people like me are moved into Montreal and to Quebec, the employee or the spouse in the family is offered support to learn French, or if it's reversed, it's English. They're offered that support for a period of time until they become efficient in it.

Right now, three members of our board of directors speak French. Two members—the board chair, Shauneen Bruder, and I—are working very hard to become fluent in French. We will be shortly naming, as I mentioned, a francophone, Quebec-based director to our board, who will speak French. We do have a considerable representation on our board of French-speaking directors.

We do not require our board of directors to speak French. We are a company that is headquartered in Quebec, but we're a North American company. We have members on our board from both Canada and the United States. It is a preference but not an obligation to speak French.

● (1735)

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Do you think that proficiency in both official languages should be part of the performance evaluation for senior executives?

Other than the linguistic abilities of an individual, what other qualifications do you look for when considering the appointment of board members?

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Ninety per cent of our senior executives here in Quebec speak French. I am happy, as I arrive in this company, to observe the commitment to and the use of the language in this company. It's been helpful to me as I learn French to be able to participate in it each day as I come to the office.

What was the second question again?

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Other than the linguistic ability, what other qualifications do you look for when considering the appointment of board members?

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Our board spends a considerable amount of time working through what qualifications—backgrounds, experiences and credentials—we need to bring to bear to ensure that we have proper governance for our company as we undertake our business across Canada and the United States, and across many different sectors. Our company is important for supporting both the health and the economy in Canada and North America, so it's important we bring a diversity of skill sets. Those are anything from financial to business to regulatory experience. The list goes on and on.

The board works very hard to make sure that the sum total of the experiences around the table are sufficient and are appropriate for managing the challenges and the opportunities before our company. It's a very complex piece of work. We spend a considerable amount of time on that.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Are you supportive of the official languages commissioner being granted additional powers to assess fines and issue orders to ensure there's compliance with regard to respecting the two official languages?

Ms. Tracy Robinson: It's my intent, as I arrive in this company, to ensure that we completely fulfill our responsibilities in supporting and promoting the French language, and that we, and I, take a leadership role in this. It's my personal priority and it's a personal commitment that I've made.

As I come into the role, I'm working to determine where we are in the process. I see a strong commitment and strong use of French as I come in here. However, as I mentioned, I have asked Mr. Finn to conduct an internal assessment and to have an external third party legal review of our processes, our policies and the approach, so that I fully understand both where we are performing well and where the opportunities are to improve.

I know there are considerations before this committee as you consider Bill C-13. We will endeavour, as you do that, to ensure that we fully understand the parameters of what you bring forward, as well as all other legislation that applies to us. With the help of the reviews I've outlined, we'll be diligent in developing our plan to build the competencies we need and the processes we need to ensure that we continue to completely fulfill our responsibilities.

It's something that is very important to us and is a commitment we've made.

• (1740)

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: What is the timeline of that review? What are the delays the Lavery law firm will be coming back to you with under the mandate that you gave it? Is there a timeline?

Ms. Tracy Robinson: The internal review will be done fairly quickly. For the external review, as we have established the mandate, we are looking to the legal firm we have engaged to fully outline the time they need. We will give them the time to ensure that they can review our practices and our policies. They will have access to our people.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Robinson.

[English]

You will be able to extend your answer through other questions.

[Translation]

The next questions will come from the second vice-chair of the committee.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Good afternoon, Ms. Robinson. Thank you for being with us.

To solve a problem, first you have to admit it exists. Do you agree that CN's history has been marked by discrimination against francophones?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: I would say that, as I come into this company, I am observing a great deal of respect for the French language and support, not only in its usage every day, but in the discussions around how to use it. I'm surrounded by French in my work, whether it be at the head office here in Montreal or... I was out in Taschereau yard, our rail yard in Montreal, a couple of weeks ago. I had the opportunity to speak to a number of employees in my beginner French. Some of them spoke French, some of them spoke English, and we were able to have a conversation respectfully. They were very gracious. I think that's the way we do this. We lead by demonstrating that we're willing and committed to using the language.

I will acknowledge we're not perfect. We have had cases. I've asked to review the cases where we have had exceptions. I understand that, over the last 10 years, we've had 11 complaints, four of which were determined to have some level of merit. We acted quickly to ensure that those were addressed. Since April, when we mailed our proxy, we've had seven complaints. Five of those were related to the board of directors. One was related to a presentation we had put on our website that hadn't been translated.

We're grateful to get that feedback. We rectified that. The other complaint was related to a file an employee had asked for that was not provided fully in the language of that employee's choice, and that's been rectified as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You said that a francophone, Mr. Charest, in this instance, sat on your board. You also said you didn't have time to find another francophone.

Why does it take so long to find a francophone to sit on your board of directors?

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Thank you for that very important question.

[English]

The matter is not around finding a francophone director that's based in Quebec. The matter is choosing the francophone director that is based in Quebec.

The search firm we have engaged on this topic is reviewing a large number of candidates, looking for the best candidate fit for us from the broader kind of evaluation of skills, competencies and background, and one whose schedule will fit with our schedule. We set our meetings five years in advance. That evaluation is taking place right now. It is more a matter of finding the right one.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I see.

Do you think a single francophone on the board is enough? Normally, there'd have to be at least three francophones on the board if you wanted to reflect Canada's linguistic diversity.

I'm thinking of the history of Canadian National and of the remarks made by former president Gordon, who said that no francophones were qualified to act as vice-president. Doesn't contriving to exclude francophones from the board show a lack of sensitivity toward francophones?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: I cannot speak to the comments of those who have come before me. What I would say now is that, as I look at the past, this company has had a history of francophone representation on our board, and Quebec-based francophone representation on the board. Sometimes it's multiple members. Sometimes it's one member. As I said, we are in a period right now that we regret, a very brief period, where we have no members and we will rectify that shortly. That—

• (1745)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Pardon me, but we have very little time. I have two minutes left.

In an article recently published in *La Presse* about communications at CN, a bilingual employee was reported as saying that she was being surrounded by more unilingual anglophones with every passing day. She noted, "When you're a francophone, you have to speak English because otherwise you can't do your job; it's as simple as that." She added that there was a thin line and that, as far as she could see, no unilingual francophones were being hired.

Does CN hire unilingual francophones? We know that nearly half of Quebec's population only speaks French.

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Yes indeed, and we are hiring unilingual francophones. We have almost 3,400 employees in Quebec. We have many employees in our operations department who operate in parts of the province that, as you suggest, speak only French, and we have many of these employees who speak only French. We have the processes and the protocols in place to make sure we can support that and can communicate in the language of those employees' choice—

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Pardon me for interrupting. I have very little time left to ask a final question.

Several examples of discrimination were cited in *La Presse* article, and the people interviewed spoke anonymously out of fear of reprisals.

You say there've been very few complaints. What do you think that means when people say they fear reprisals?

The Chair: Please answer very briefly, Ms. Robinson.

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: If that is true, it's completely unacceptable. It hasn't been my sense since I've been with this company that there would be any reprisals for things like that. We need to create.... It's very important that we—

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, Ms. Robinson. Six minutes go so quick.

[Translation]

I now give the floor to Mr. Boulerice, who is replacing Ms. Ashton.

Mr. Boulerice, you have six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to Ms. Robinson for taking the time to be with us today.

I introduced a motion to have you meet with us today and explain your point of view, and you can understand why.

You're aware of the scandal involving Air Canada and its president and CEO. We subsequently learned that a member of CN's board was leaving to enter politics, or rather to return to politics, and there are suddenly no more francophones on CN's board.

Are you aware that, for many Quebecers and francophones, that was an annoying and insulting situation?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: If the question is whether I am aware of how Quebecers feel, I am aware. I've read...and I've had people approach me. I am aware that this hasn't been a positive thing for members of the Quebec community, and indeed some of our employees.

It's certainly not what we want in CN, and not what I want as I move into this company. As I said, we have a long and very rich history in Quebec and in Montreal. We're very proud of that. As I look at this company, I see us as being a very strong supporter over a long period of time of the French language. I'm proud of that, and it's a commitment that I am making as I go forward.

As I have joined the company, I have moved from western Canada to Montreal.

[Translation]

I'm very happy to be living in Montreal and learning the French language.

[English]

It's going to be a—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Ms. Robinson, let's be clear here: you know how hurtful and insulting this can be for many francophones, for many Quebecers. I know that you weren't in your position at the time and that you aren't personally responsible. So I'm not asking you for a personal apology.

Is Canadian National apologizing for the fact that there are no more francophones on its board? Will you apologize to the committee on your company's behalf?

• (1750)

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for his question.

What I'm offering is a commitment to appoint a francophone director from Quebec in the very near future. That's a priority for me and for the board.

[English]

What I offer to you is a firm commitment on the actions we are taking to rectify the situation.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you.

As I understand it, you're not apologizing on behalf of CN, but you are making a commitment. We'll see what actually happens.

The question in my mind is how can the number can fall to zero when the board loses only one francophone.

Would you support the idea of applying the Official Languages Act to the boards of companies subject to it, such as Canadian National, and of setting a minimum percentage and quotas for those boards? That would guarantee an end to this kind of situation.

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: I would tell you that we have on our board of directors right now, three members who speak French. Two of us are working hard to become bilingual. We will be appointing a francophone, Quebec-based member of the board shortly. They also will obviously speak French.

It's been a long commitment that this company has made. I think our track record speaks for itself. As I said, we're in a short period of time where we do not have a francophone, Quebec-based member, but we will rectify that very shortly.

As to the question of whether there should be some other approach to this through the government, that would be something that Parliament would need to consider, I suppose.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Ms. Robinson.

I have a final question for you.

I know that a third party is conducting an independent investigation of CN's management and of the respect accorded to the French language and francophones within the business.

What's your action plan and what's your vision to ensure that francophone workers are respected at CN?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: I think that this company has done a very strong job of embracing the French language, being actively headquartered in Montreal and very active, supportive and a leader in supporting the French language in this province and, I hope, in this country.

I want to be someone who not only continues that tradition, but it's a personal commitment of mine and a personal interest that this company aligns with those around us in ensuring that we protect, support and show that leadership in supporting the French language as we go forward.

I believe it's an important role that CN will play, and we'll play it by being a positive role model in doing it.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: In that case, I can't wait to have a conversation with you in French on the streets of Montreal.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boulerice and Ms. Robinson.

There is very little time left before 6:00 p.m. I'm going to give the floor to three more speakers. Each of them will have exactly three minutes. I'll be very strict about that.

Mr. Gourde, the floor is yours.

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

My question is for Ms. Robinson.

You're well aware of the complaints that have been received. However, did you know that, when Sébastien Labbé, vice-president for Bulk at CN, appeared before the Standing Committee on Transport on April 25, he delivered a statement in English only? And yet it would have been easy for him to do it in French, at least in part, because he speaks very good French.

Were you aware of that?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Yes, I have been made aware of the situation.

Monsieur Sébastien Labbé, as you note, speaks French very well. We're not perfect. I think, if he were doing that again, he would make his prepared remarks in French, but I am also aware that he was able and did respond in French to the questions put to him in French.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

Sometimes it's important for large organizations such as yours to have a culture of recognition. If I'm not mistaken, the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec is a CN shareholder. It manages Quebeckers' savings. Quebeckers trust CN and invest their money in it, and that says a lot. However, we're annoyed when we sense that it doesn't have a culture of recognition of French.

Can you assure us that the next two or three persons who sit on the board will be Quebec francophones, not francophones from Alberta, for example?

• (1755)

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: First let me say that I'm disappointed that you don't feel that support, with 90% of our executive in Quebec and two-thirds of our executives across North America speaking French.

Yes, I am from Alberta, and it is a great honour for me to sit in this position with CN. I have committed to learning French.

[Translation]

Speaking French is one of my priorities. I want to ensure that everyone can communicate with me and CN in the official language of his or her choice.

[English]

I think that the right way to demonstrate our commitment is to... I think it's a strong statement of our company that we would have someone from western Canada commit very publicly to learning French.

[Translation]

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

I'd like to ask you a final question.

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

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You said you're very proud of your company. However, CN isn't all that proud of its infrastructure.

May we please have an update on when the "pont de Québec" will be painted?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: I must tell you that I am aware that we are in discussions around the bridge in Quebec City. At this point in time, with my tenure here, I can't give you any details around the nature of those discussions or any timing associated with that.

The Chair: Ms. Robinson, if you have any further information you could provide the committee, feel free to provide it to our clerk.

The next questioner for three minutes is Mr. Angelo Iacono.

[Translation]

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

Welcome, Ms. Robinson and Mr. Finn.

Ms. Robinson, congratulations on your appointment, which occurred on January 25, 2020.

I very much appreciated your saying that CN leads by example.

Considering that, do you offer French courses to CN executives and board members? If so, are they supposed to take them?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: I am certainly in the middle of classes, and I think that the right way to learn French is not just to take classes but to immerse yourself in French. I'm surrounded by French here. I'm surrounded by French employees.

[Translation]

In my courses, I practise my French every day. For example, I speak with my colleagues, I listen to podcasts, and I order my meals in French.

[English]

This is the way I want us to show respect for the language, and that is to use it. Yes, we provide support.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I'll move on to my next question because I have very little time left.

Do you think bilingualism should be a requirement when hiring executives?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Whether or not it's a requirement, 90% of our senior executives in Quebec speak French. I think we are demonstrating that we are very supportive. We take the language very seriously. We operate a North American organization. English will always be part of our company, but in Quebec, where we're proud to have our headquarters, 90% of our executives speak French.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Do you think French-language proficiency should be a factor in executives' performance evaluations?

[English]

Ms. Tracy Robinson: Right now, it's a very active part of what we do in the company every day. As I said, I'm surrounded each day, in the Montreal head office, by very active, French-speaking, passionate... French is part of our day-to-day dialogue here. Certainly, we speak English as required, but French is part of our daily dialogue.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I have a final question for you, Ms. Robinson.

Do you understand why many Quebeckers and Canadians are upset when they hear that large Crown corporations such as yours, CN, which is headquartered in Montreal, or Air Canada, don't show leadership on official bilingualism?

• (1800)

[*English*]

As you said just now, you like to lead by example.

What is your feeling about this? Going forward, if we want to repair this, we need to know what has been damaged and tampered with. What do you read from this? What do you get from this? As you mentioned many times today, you have lots of Quebeckers around you. What's the feeling you get, internally, and what do you intend to go forward with?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Iacono, but you have largely passed your three minutes.

Before we leave, we have Mr. Beaulieu for just a second.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'll be very brief, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Robinson, you've often repeated that 90% of your executives in Quebec speak French. Would you please send us a document outlining your basis for saying that?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

[*English*]

Ms. Robinson, if you can provide us, in writing, with any further information to complete the question you couldn't complete, please feel free to provide that to our clerk. It would be very much appreciated. If you could complete the answer to Mr. Iacono's question, as well, it would be very much appreciated.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Finn and Ms. Robinson, I wish to apologize on behalf of the committee. Voting often occurs in the House of Commons, and that sometimes delays committee meetings. We thank you for your patience and your testimony.

The meeting is adjourned.

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