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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (0850)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 103 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Since we are all regulars on the committee, I won't read all the instructions related to acoustic incidents. However, I would remind you not to turn on two microphones at once to protect the hearing health of the interpreters.

We're resuming debate on Mr. Beaulieu's motion and Mr. Samson's amendment.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I was under the impression that our Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure was to meet for 30 minutes—which we did—and that we were going to discuss its report before we moved on to the matter at hand today.

The Chair: Actually, I should have taken a few moments to say that our subcommittee has indeed met, but that it will meet again before drafting its report.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Chair, I want my colleague to be well informed and I would remind him that you did say at the last meeting that you wouldn't be able to submit the subcommittee's report for discussion until the report had been translated.

The Chair: That's correct.

Mr. Joël Godin: So we're definitely not going to talk about it today.

The Chair: We will not.

Now that the entire committee is sitting, I'd like to inform all members that our subcommittee didn't have enough time and will therefore have to meet again to prepare this report. We've had a good meeting this morning, but we'll have to meet again. It's important for our study on the education continuum. So we'll come back to the subject later.

We were debating Mr. Beaulieu's motion, to which Mr. Samson had moved an amendment. We are resuming the debate.

Mr. Samson, you have the floor.

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

Thank you for informing us about the subcommittee's work. We were not at that meeting, as we were not invited. At least we know there have been some productive discussions. You weren't able to submit recommendations, but I'm sure that the work was well done.

Now we'll go back to my amendment. As you know, it was a strategy to reach out to the opposition to find a solution together. In my opinion, the discussion we've been having for probably four weeks should have ended with the vote last week. I would therefore ask the members around the table to act wisely: We must withdraw this motion and get to work.

I also want to congratulate the members who got to work at the last meeting: We heard from the Commissioner of Official Languages, and his important testimony guided us on certain actions related to post-secondary education and the education continuum. So I want to commend the members for that work. In addition, this morning in camera, we discussed the other studies planned in connection with this continuum, which we are still working on.

I think we've reached a turning point. So I'm reaching out to the opposition and suggesting that the motion be withdrawn and that we get on with the work. Organizations across Canada, including anglophones in Quebec, want us to get to work to meet the needs of those communities.

They were in the void for a long time, since they didn't exist under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We referred to section 23 of the charter, which concerns the right to elementary and secondary education in the minority language, and excludes early childhood and post-secondary education.

We have no limits, and we need to get to work to help these organizations. Once again, I'm asking the members, who have been working closely together for years, to take action so that we can fulfill our responsibilities and obligations as members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

• (0855)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): I don't know if Mr. Samson wants to withdraw his amendment. In any case, we're ready to vote.

The Chair: As you know, if we're debating an amendment, we can't stop discussions, comments or arguments.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In that case, we're ready to vote.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor.

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

I reiterate what my colleague Mr. Samson said. There was an incident and Mr. Drouin apologized. It's disappointing that Mr. Drouin said that in his conversation with the witnesses. However, the damage has been done and he has apologized a number of times.

I think that what we're doing is no better, since we're not doing what the public expects of us. I have received comments in my riding about this. Some organizations have called me. They were frustrated by Mr. Drouin's comments, but they're saying that we're continuing to debate something that's not going to do anything except remove someone from the committee.

They want to know what we're doing for them. The time we're spending on the incident involving Mr. Drouin is preventing us from defending and promoting the interests of our organizations, our fellow Canadians and all those facing language challenges. It's disappointing. Is the goal simply to remove a member from the committee and humiliate them? If so, how far does the committee intend to go, and at what cost? Do we think we're going to advance the cause of the French language and promote it in this way? I don't think so. So I ask that we reconsider this motion so that we focus on promoting the French language.

I'm going to share an anecdote. I was born in 1965. When I started high school, I went to an English school because francophones wanted nothing to do with Italians. In the 1970s, when I started kindergarten, I went to an English school. I was supposed to go to a French school, but the Quebecers, the old-stock francophones, wanted nothing to do with Italians because they felt threatened. So I continued my education in English. However, when the time came to do my law training, I didn't do it in English. I studied law in French. People won't believe me, but I didn't go to McGill University to study law, even though I studied political science there. For my law degree, I chose the most Quebecer university and the most francophone university there is: Université du Québec à Montréal.

I integrated well and I was well respected. The proof is that today, I still speak French. Sometimes, there are words I don't understand or that I say with an Italian accent, but I'm a product of Quebec. I was born in Quebec. I learned French because I believe that Quebec and Canada should be bilingual in order to be stronger. I don't think there should be only one unilingual francophone province, because that will exclude the others who want to learn French.

All I want to say is that it's more important to focus on promoting our language, our languages, rather than focusing today on the motion put forward simply to humiliate a member of the committee. After all, you have to understand that we're all members. We all make mistakes. The member has apologized. Others will make mistakes as well, and they will probably apologize too. We mustn't dwell on human error, on an error of conviction. We can't say that Mr. Drouin doesn't respect the act and doesn't believe in it. He's a great defender of the French language, especially in Ontario.

• (0900)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Serré, you have the floor.

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

I want to thank everyone for being here this morning.

I'm a little disappointed that we're continuing to discuss Mr. Beaulieu's motion, but I'd nevertheless like to expand a little on Mr. Iacono's and Mr. Samson's comments. In addition, I think it's important, even though a number of meetings have dealt with the matter under consideration today, that the people following our work have some understanding of what's going on.

The Standing Committee on Official Languages has worked very well up until now. We did a good job with Bill C-13, which sought to amend the Official Languages Act for the first time in 50 years. The work was difficult, because we had to address issues that affected the entire country. However, we got through it thanks to the co-operation of all parties, who all voted in favour of modernizing the act, because it really needed to be modernized.

We've also done some good studies, including the one on immigration. As you know, it was a very important study, for which we have completed the report.

Then, before the recent motions were introduced, we were reviewing the report concluding our study on the economic development of minority communities across the country, a very important matter. In fact, this week, I am in the Sudbury region, my riding. We talked about economic development, FedNor and the important contribution of French to the economy of Ontario and northern Ontario. So I'm really looking forward to getting back to the recommendations in our report on economic development.

We have a number of issues to discuss, not just economic development. We need to get back to them as quickly as possible. Not only do we need to continue our work on the economic development report, but as you know, we've also already begun the report on funding for post-secondary institutions. A number of witnesses have appeared on the subject. We were hearing the witnesses at the end of the meetings, because the opposition wanted to keep the minister and the officials for the end. Sometimes we have the ministers appear at the beginning of the meetings, but this time we had Minister Boissonnault at committee to wrap up the study on minority post-secondary institutions. As you know, they're in crisis across the country. They need help from the federal government, but also from the provinces. So I hope that we'll be able to start studying this issue again.

We weren't even able to complete our discussions because of the motion and the amendment that were moved. Mr. Beaulieu's motion was introduced on May 20, I believe. It's the same one submitted by Mr. Godin on May 15, when Minister Boissonnault appeared before the committee. Then, so people who are watching can understand, we had additional meetings on this, including during constituency week, and even on the Monday night of the long weekend. It's rare for us to have meetings at times like that.

We therefore discussed the motions submitted by Mr. Godin and Mr. Beaulieu before Mr. Samson moved an amendment, in particular to delete the part of the motion directing the committee to ask the chief government whip to remove Mr. Drouin from the committee.

● (0905)

However, as I already mentioned last week, that is not how Parliament works. I wish it were possible. I know that all parties have made recommendations to the whips to remove members of certain parties who have done unacceptable things during committee meetings. I mentioned the case of Rachael Thomas, who told Minister Pascale St-Onge not to speak French. That was unacceptable, but she did apologize, as did Mr. Drouin.

The motions of Mr. Godin and Mr. Beaulieu ask the committee to relieve the president of an association of his duties. I would like to remind people that we have 12 Parliamentary associations. I'm the president of ParlAmericas, and I'm a member of the Joint Inter-parliamentary Council, which deals with these parliamentary associations.

I don't remember the standing order on which that decision was based, but the motions of Mr. Beaulieu and Mr. Godin were even ruled out of order, because the committee cannot ask an association to remove one of its members or its president. A committee cannot tell a whip to do it either. These motions were therefore ruled out of order, but since the Liberals are in a minority numbers-wise, the other three parties decided to continue debating them. I have a hard time understanding that, just like Mr. Samson.

We're at an impasse and we're reaching out to our colleagues, who are flying in the face of the committee's rules and procedures. We find ourselves in the current situation because we're in a minority and the members of the opposition challenged the rules and the chair's decision.

The committee has not completed its study on post-secondary education and its study on economic development. We want to complete the very important education continuum, from early childhood to elementary, secondary and post-secondary. When we talk about the continuum, we're talking about educational ecosystems.

We're currently negotiating with the provinces. They have played a key role at every meeting we've had here. As a result, the committee really needs to resume its studies and examine its responsibilities.

In fact, the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario sent a letter to all committee members. If members haven't read it, I can read it here so the public knows what it says. This group, like others,

said that committee members had worked collaboratively in the past and that it was time to move on to the important issues, of which there are many. The committee even has a motion from Ms. Ashton, who wants a study on early childhood in the context of the education continuum. We know how important early childhood is.

I wish to remind people who are following our proceedings that the questions the opposition members put to the minister when he appeared were about Francis Drouin, and none of them asked a question about post-secondary education. In addition, the Commissioner of Official Languages appeared last week. The majority of the questions he was asked by our two Conservative members were about Francis Drouin. They asked the commissioner for his opinion, whereas this issue has nothing to do with the mandate of the Commissioner of Official Languages. The commissioner now has new powers. He has a lot on his plate. He did an interim report. So the opposition decided to politicize the situation when Minister Boissonnault and the commissioner appeared.

● (0910)

I therefore strongly urge my colleagues to come back to the table to find a solution to this impasse together. Like Mr. Samson, I am reaching out to my colleagues. The motion we're debating is telling the chief government whip what to do. I'm sure that the whips of the opposition parties are the only ones responsible for determining who sits on each committee and parliamentary associations.

In fact, perhaps the public doesn't know, but Mr. Godin's original motion, which was repeated by Mr. Beaulieu and is now the subject of an amendment moved by Mr. Samson, asks that member Francis Drouin step down as chair of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, the APF. It is not up to a parliamentary committee to make such a decision, but rather the members of the parliamentary association in question. I'd also like to remind the public and members of the committee that APF members met last Thursday and there were three votes. We don't know the details, since it was a secret ballot, but APF members decided to keep Mr. Drouin as president. We're proud that Canada has one of its francophones at the head of the APF. In fact, Mr. Drouin has already left to carry out his duties and prepare for the convention that will take place in Montreal in July, so the debate is closed.

However, I want to clarify something. I've heard some members say that the Liberals are standing up for Mr. Drouin. However, we all recognized that his comments and the way he addressed the witnesses were unacceptable. We recognized that it was a mistake, a small misdeed. As I have said several times, it makes no sense that we continue to waste time talking about it. We said it: Mr. Drouin's comments were unacceptable. He offered a very clear apology directly to the two witnesses.

They are entitled to their opinion, a fairly direct opinion in their case. Like Mr. Drouin, I don't agree with them, but obviously, as parliamentarians, the approach we need to take is not the one that Mr. Drouin chose. However, he has apologized, so that's it.

As a Franco-Ontarian, I can contribute to the discussion. I know that the whole issue of Quebec separation is hotly debated in Quebec. I understand why there are people like Mr. Beaulieu who have fought all their lives for Quebec to separate. These individuals are proud of their language and culture. That's important, and I understand that. As I mentioned, I'm a little jealous of Mr. Généreux, Mr. Godin and Mr. Beaulieu, who have had the opportunity to work in French all their lives. I haven't had that opportunity here in northern Ontario, but I can assure you that the French language is very present, even though we fight for it every day.

● (0915)

My ancestors on both sides of the family came from here, in Ontario. They paddled down the Ottawa River in a canoe, just like indigenous people did. My ancestors came here in the 1870s, and we kept our language. We still speak French. It's true that I sometimes use anglicisms when I speak, but that's just who I am as Marc Serré. I'm proud of that.

When we hear comments that are very much in favour of Quebec separation, aimed at breaking up the country, it hurts francophones in Ontario. It scares us. If Quebec separates and leaves Canada, Quebec will be French-only. We are afraid that governments like Ontario's will decide that the province should be English-only, which will mean the end of francophones.

In Ontario, we've had governments like the Mike Harris government, which drastically cut services to francophones. The Doug Ford government eliminated the position of French Language Services Commissioner, as well as a number of services for francophones in Ontario. As francophones here in Ontario, we work hard to ensure that our rights are respected.

When you look at the motion—

The Chair: Just a moment, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Godin, I believe you have a point of order.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Once again, we see that the discussion is dragging on. I would like my fellow member to come back to the main topic, Mr. Samson's amendment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Serré, I let you continue talking, but you occasionally go off-topic. You say things that are relevant, digress and then come back to the topic. This time you went a little far. You need to stick to the amendment or the original motion.

I would like to remind members of what Standing Order 116(2) (a) states when there is debate on a motion or a proposed amendment to that motion:

... the Chair of a standing, special or legislative committee may not bring a debate to an end while there are members present who still wish to participate.

If I were to do that, the ruling could be brought to the attention of the Speaker of the House. If the Speaker were to rule that I had improperly shut down debate, any further discussion and decisions of the committee could be nullified.

The only time a committee chair can put an end to a debate is when the same thing is repeated on a given subject. I've said this before in another debate, maybe a year ago, and I think all members were here. I give people who repeat themselves three chances and no more. Once the point has been made, we have to move on.

I will tell you what my work as chair entails as well as my reasoning, so that it is clear to everyone.

I can give leeway if someone strays from the subject at hand. If someone draws parallels, gives examples and then comes back to the subject, I have no choice but to allow it, because it is part of the debate. I don't want to risk shutting down this debate. Imagine if I put an end to debate on a motion in committee and then, later on, the Speaker of the House decides that I did the wrong thing. All the work done by the committee afterwards would be nullified. The Standing Orders allow for that, and that is what I want to avoid.

Mr. Serré, you were not that far from the essence of the motion, but you were going off on a tangent and straying a bit too far from the subject. I would therefore suggest that you come back to the motion or the amendment, since the two are inseparable. The floor is yours.

● (0920)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Yes, I was obviously trying to draw a parallel. I agree that Mr. Drouin's comments are unacceptable, but I was trying to put them in context. As Franco-Ontarians, we find the entire debate on Quebec separation frustrating. Some of the witnesses who come before the committee are Bloc supporters, and their comments cause frustration for francophones. I'm not defending Mr. Drouin's comments, but I just wanted to put them in a Franco-Ontarian context. A number of people in my riding have spoken to me about this, and their comments are similar.

I would like to make an aside. My mother told me that she and my father, who was a member of Parliament at the time, lived through the events of the Front de libération du Québec, or FLQ, years. My mother was a strong person, but it still upset her to have the RCMP in northern Ontario for 24 hours during the entire debate on the FLQ and separation. It was quite the experience for Franco-Ontarians.

I want to come back to Mr. Drouin's passionate outburst. He made a mistake and he apologized. I don't understand why the committee is continuing to debate this motion. It calls on the chief government whip and member of the leadership team to remove a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, which is unbelievable. It also calls for Mr. Drouin to resign from his role as chair of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie. That's what the debate is about right now. It's really quite odd.

As Mr. Samson said, why are we continuing to debate this motion? There is a lot of other work to do, and I think we could move on to important things.

In fact, the people in my riding of Nickel Belt have clearly told me that we need to continue talking about important issues. A motion involving the whip and a parliamentary association should not be a point of debate. Once again, I am asking the three opposition parties why they want to continue debating this motion.

As we all know, the whips traditionally rejig the membership of parliamentary committees during the summer. In September, will we still have the same Liberal, Conservative, Bloc and NDP members we have today? Maybe not. There may be new members in September. The whips always change parliamentary secretaries and committee members. There is no provision in the Standing Orders for this committee or any other parliamentary committee to remove a member from a committee, let alone remove a member as chair of a parliamentary association such as ParlAmericas.

However, the motion calls on the committee to recommend that Mr. Drouin be removed from the position of chair of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie. I certainly hope that it is not the intention of some members of the committee to politicize the issue in order to get votes in Quebec. I would like to remind people that parliamentary associations, traditionally, are non-partisan. I am a member of the Joint Interparliamentary Council and the chair of ParlAmericas. Parliamentary associations represent the country. I wanted to make that clear to committee members and members of the public who may not already know that.

● (0925)

If the committee decides to politicize parliamentary associations, I think it needs to be careful before doing so in public. The decisions an association makes are made internally by the parliamentarians who are members of that association. The Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie is an important association that brings together parliamentarians from a number of countries. I know that my fellow members belong to other associations themselves, so they know that parliamentary associations are responsible for making their own decisions, not parliamentary committees.

Coming back to the motion before us, I don't understand why the three opposition parties keep pushing the committee to recommend that Mr. Drouin resign as chair of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie and that the chief government whip remove him from the committee.

I proposed that the motion be amended to address the committee's outright irresponsible approach, but we didn't even debate my amendment because the three opposition parties voted to have it ruled inadmissible. I wanted us to focus on the committee's responsibilities and the chair to apologize to the witnesses on behalf of the committee. I think my amendment was admissible, but the three opposition parties were quick to reject it.

Members are saying that we don't want to move forward, but the official languages minister and the official languages commissioner appeared before the committee. The committee is able to move forward, given that the opposition put aside all the other motions in order to bring the commissioner before the committee, which is a good sign. Now can we move on to the next step? I'm talking about reviewing the report on economic development and figuring out whether we need to bring the officials back.

I want to remind members that Mr. Godin's motion was the same as Mr. Beaulieu's. The minister, Mr. Boissonnault, was here that day, and so were the department officials, ready to talk about post-secondary institutions during the second hour of our meeting. Unfortunately, we couldn't proceed as planned because of the motions that were put forward.

It's hard to believe that we are in this situation, given that Mr. Drouin apologized, which, frankly, was embarrassing for him. Nevertheless, the committee insists on bringing up the matter.

I could talk at length about how many times committee reports have been debated in the House, wasting time the House would otherwise spend debating pharmacare, the budget, dental care and other legislation. I want committee members and the public to keep in mind that the motion we are currently discussing will go back to the House. What will happen then? We don't have much sitting time left in June to get through our work. We are going to spend time discussing this motion in the House of Commons, instead of talking about bills currently under consideration.

The bills before the House include legislation to implement the fall economic statement, which would double the rural top-up for the carbon rebate to 20%. That measure is important to me, but the bill still hasn't been passed.

I can go on and on about the motion. I hope the three opposition parties don't intend to use this motion to delay consideration of the bills before the House. I hope we can find a way to work together. As Mr. Samson and Mr. Iacono mentioned, we need to resolve this impasse. How can we move past this, so we can talk about things that matter? We've already spent hours and hours debating this motion about Mr. Drouin.

● (0930)

It's clear, however, that the matter is closed. Apologies have been made. We've said this before, and I will say it again: witnesses who come before the committee and express views we don't agree with should not be spoken to that way. I want to point out, though, that Mr. Beaulieu and Mr. Godin put words in Mr. Drouin's mouth. He was referring to the witnesses' comments, not the witnesses themselves.

Plenty of insults are being hurled in the House. We could spend hours listening to committee and House debates in which certain members point fingers at others. Members should be careful. The matter is closed. The member made a mistake and apologized. The committee has a job to do, for the francophone community as a whole and all those living in minority communities across the country.

I beseech committee members to find a way to put emotions aside, so we can focus on issues that matter in the few weeks of June we have left. June is always a challenging time, with the opposition putting forward motions for debate and sending committee reports to the House in an effort to delay progress. The motion before us will obviously be sent back to the House of Commons. Why? I don't know. Perhaps the opposition can enlighten me.

I would love for the House to get back to discussing pharmacare, diabetes, housing supports and the things people ask the committee for. The matter is closed. I hope the opposition will consider that and try to move forward.

I have more to say, but since we've already spent at least three weeks talking about Mr. Beaulieu's motion—which is virtually identical to Mr. Godin's—and Mr. Samson's amendment, I think it's time we do some real work.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk about the francophone community in northern Ontario and our passion. As I mentioned, we have to find a way to protect French in Quebec as well as throughout Canada, because our country is richer for having two languages. People like my father who fought for a bilingual country are the reason why I am here today—a member of Parliament representing a riding in northern Ontario. We modernized the bill my father voted on in 1969. It is tremendously important to the francophone community, if we want bilingual people representing us in the public service. That is why we need to get on with it. We need to stop the decline of French in Quebec and across the country.

Motions like this one are not the way to get on with it, considering that the motion will be sent back to the House for further debate, even though it has already been debated and resulted in an apology. I repeat, Mr. Drouin is a champion of the francophone community in his riding, in Ontario, in Canada. He has worked very hard, as you all know. In fulfilling his responsibilities, he has travelled all over the world defending francophones.

We can talk about this shortly, but Minister Roberge commented on social media that a recent report in Quebec identified other factors that were also contributing to the decline of French. Mr. Drouin actually drew a parallel with the report in his comments. Quebec's separation would obviously make Quebec a minority language country in North America. We have a job to do and real measures to put in place.

As far as Mr. Beaulieu's motion is concerned, I will say that the way to do things is not to call on the chief government whip—who isn't in charge of the committee—to remove a member or on the committee to recommend that Mr. Drouin resign as chair of the *Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie*. He will be participating in a meeting of the *Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie* this summer, in July.

It's time to get down to business and focus on other issues. It is unacceptable for this to go on. This summer, the whip will be making changes to the membership of committees and parliamentary associations. It's time to focus on the issues that matter to the francophone community and people in minority communities around the country.

I know that others want to speak, so I will leave it there. I hope we can find a way to move on to more important things. Mr. Chair, I will yield the floor to the next speaker.

● (0935)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Blois, welcome to the exciting Standing Committee on Official Languages. The floor is yours.

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to be here with the members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I am filling in for a regular member of the committee.

I'd like to take a few minutes to explain how this motion relates to my riding and my experience with the French language.

I am the member for Kings—Hants, in Nova Scotia. I am a very proud Nova Scotia MP.

First, I'll explain the connection between the motion and Mr. Drouin. I chair the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, which Mr. Drouin, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, is also on, of course. When I read the motion, I absolutely felt it was a personal attack against Mr. Drouin. As I see it, the purpose of the motion is, unfortunately, to pick a fight and attack Mr. Drouin personally. That isn't a legitimate use of the committee's time or authority.

I'm extremely proud to be the first member of my family who can speak French. My last name is Blois, which is pronounced differently in French. There is a city in France named Blois. There is even a château of Blois, where I believe French royals vacationed. The first Blois to come to North America was Abraham Blois, a soldier in the British Army. The relationship between the French language and the Blois family is problematic, of course, because that connection was probably lost following the Norman invasion of England. I'm not entirely sure, but I don't think it's likely that Abraham and Sarah Blois spoke French when they came to North America.

I am also extremely proud because, when I came to Ottawa, I wasn't all that proficient in French. Now, I'm speaking to my fellow members on the Standing Committee on Official Languages. My French isn't perfect, of course, but I think it's good enough to discuss and debate this motion.

I completely agree with what Mr. Samson, Mr. Iacono and Mr. Serré said about how the Conservative and Bloc members put forward this motion. Across Canada, many issues and initiatives are important for the French language. I believe that, prior to this motion, the committee was studying the importance of French and the challenges facing Canada's francophone colleges and universities.

I want to talk about my riding, because I want my fellow members to keep in mind that no one in my family speaks French. When I'm in Kings—Hants, it's hard to have a conversation with anyone in French, since most of the people in my riding, 90%, are English speakers. It can be hard, but it's necessary. I picked up a bit of French in high school, in Nova Scotia.

• (0940)

I think the Standing Committee on Official Languages would be better off using its time studying the Government of Canada's methods, initiatives and obligations, so as to improve the status of French and find ways to encourage other Canadians to learn French. We need to train teachers if we want to improve the status of French across the country.

Here's another anecdote, which has to do with the motion, of course. In 2012, I was a competitive athlete, a fastball pitcher. In 2011, I was on Nova Scotia's team, and we won the Canadian championships. The next year, though, Nova Scotia didn't send a team to the championships, so I called the coach of Quebec's team to ask whether we could play on that team in the Canadian championships.

I was able to speak a little French, because, as I said, I had taken some classes in high school. I spent three weeks in the Bellechasse region. My colleagues from Quebec may be familiar with the area, which Dominique Vien represents. It's a lovely region.

• (0945)

Mr. Joël Godin: It's not as beautiful as it is back home.

Mr. Kody Blois: Every MP is proud of their riding. If an MP did not say that their riding was the most beautiful in Canada, that would be a problem. Bellechasse is a very beautiful place. It's very similar to my riding, Kings—Hants. There, you'll find many farms, and you'll find communities and very rural villages. I spent three weeks in the small village of Saint-Gervais—perhaps my colleagues from Quebec know it—where 99% of the people speak French. For a very young athlete, this kind of French immersion was a great opportunity to learn the French language, because all of my conversations were in French.

I will link this with the motion. It's important to preserve and promote the French language in Quebec, of course, but also throughout Canada. We must encourage anglophones and people with no connection to the French language to improve their knowledge of French. We have to make sure that all those efforts are deployed throughout the country.

My colleague Mr. Serré proudly represents northern Ontario, and Mr. Drouin is also a proud francophone MP. I have seen his efforts in that context. Because I am a Liberal MP, I have had several conversations with Mr. Drouin, who is a champion of the French language. Specifically, he holds the position of president of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, which is impressive. His duties include promoting the French language around the world, including in Ontario, in Quebec, throughout Canada and other countries where French is spoken.

It is therefore necessary for me to give my opinion regarding the motion: It's a squabble, a personal attack. As Mr. Serré or Mr. Samson said, the vote is over for the presidency of the Assemblée par-

lementaire de la Francophonie. Every member of the assembly has their own opinion and has the right to vote. The majority of the assembly's members voted for Mr. Drouin to keep his position. That part of the motion is therefore incorrect and no longer necessary. I think every MP, especially francophone MPs, as well as those who represent francophone ridings throughout Canada and Quebec, should reconsider their position. We have to decide if it's necessary to continue with this witch hunt, if I'm using the right expression.

The Chair: That's the right expression.

Mr. Kody Blois: Okay.

Their goal was therefore to use parliamentarians' time to keep talking about this motion. I am one of Mr. Drouin's colleagues, and I find the way MPs behaved to be completely incomprehensible, especially after the fact. Of course, there's always partisanship in the House of Commons and sometimes even here, at parliamentary committees. However, the show is over and now we have to come back to the necessary work of improving the situation of the French language and official languages throughout Canada.

Mr. Chair, we are both very proud MPs from the Maritimes and I congratulate you for chairing the Standing Committee on Official Languages. You know the importance of Bill C-49, which seeks to amend the Atlantic Accords. I recently sat on the Standing Committee on Natural Resources. There is a link between the motion we're discussing and the way certain MPs take the floor. The Atlantic Accords are a source of pride for us in Nova Scotia, as well as Newfoundland and Labrador, of course. When oil was found in the Atlantic Ocean, there was a certain amount of concern, because we weren't sure who, between the federal government and that of Newfoundland and Labrador, would be responsible for the resource.

I will now explain how it is all connected to the motion. Yesterday, Bill C-49 passed at third reading stage, and I thank every MP who voted for it to be sent to the Senate. The Premier of Nova Scotia, Mr. Houston, clearly expressed his support for the bill. The Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, Mr. Furey, was also very clear when he said it was necessary to pass the bill, because it's the counterpart to provincial legislation. When the legislation is amended in Ottawa, provinces have to amend their own legislation as well. In this case, it's the St. John's and Halifax legislative assemblies.

I was a member of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, and our natural resources are also a source of pride for us in the Atlantic. Even if it's not the same thing, I understand that the French language and francophone culture are very important, not only for Quebecers, of course, but also for Franco-Ontarians, including the citizens of Nickel Belt and Glengarry—Prescott—Russell.

However, in the case of the bill, comments from Conservative MPs lacked a great deal of respect, unfortunately. They said it was not necessary to listen to the premiers of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador or to the witnesses who were there. Those comments were.... What is the right adjective for "lacking respect," Mr. Chair?

• (0950)

The Chair: It's "disrespectful."

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Imagine that a majority of members on the Standing Committee on Natural Resources moves a motion for Ms. Stubbs to no longer occupy her role on the committee. It would be completely crazy. It's true that I have been, and still am, frustrated by the comments of my Conservative colleagues on something that is a source of pride for us. I understand that the context is different than that of this committee, but the principle is the same. I remind my Conservative and Bloc colleagues, as well as Ms. Ashton, that if this motion were to go forward, it would create a dangerous precedent.

In committee, determined parliamentarians may ask ministers or other witnesses detailed questions, and maybe they are MPs we don't like because our political interests are different. However, if we were to choose to present a motion for one of those members to be excluded from the committee and encourage the whips or other parties to exclude them, that would be completely crazy.

I believe the motion before us today is not reasonable. I repeat: It is a personal attack. Many articles appeared in national media that will help Canadians form an opinion of Mr. Drouin's behaviour. As Mr. Samson and Mr. Serre said, Mr. Drouin apologized for his comments, which were problematic. I agree with the fact that the words used were not okay, but Mr. Drouin apologized. I don't understand why the committee is still debating this motion. I don't understand why members of the opposition want to continue this witch hunt.

I am a member of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, and I am very proud of Canadian farmers. I want to give you that committee's perspective. I am, of course, very proud of your work, Mr. Chair. In general, the Standing Committee on Official Languages has a good reputation when it comes to working collaboratively, I think, and concentrating on what's necessary to improve the state of the French language, but also English in some minority communities. In my opinion, the committee works well together.

• (0955)

At the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, members have different opinions based on their political party. For example, Mr. Barlow is very determined in the House of Commons. He is a man of principle at committee, but he is also reasonable. Same thing goes for Mr. Perron, Mr. MacGregor and all the members of the committee. We have some political battles, but we always concentrate on people's interests or those of Canadian farmers.

As an occasional member of this committee, I think it's necessary to encourage all regular members of the committee to consider the interests of their fellow citizens and stakeholders, and determine if this activity is constructive in the context of preserving the French language.

Personally, I do not believe this exercise to be beneficial. Mr. Serré gave the point of view of Ontario's Assemblée de la francophonie. I think the committee must continue its proceedings. At a certain point, I think stakeholders will see that this exercise is nothing more than an attack, that it is not constructive and that it does

not serve their interests. The committee's responsibility is to work in the interests of Canadian citizens and students, for example those in Nova Scotia who need access to high school French-language classes and more resources. We need there to be greater collaboration between provinces, territories and the government of Canada.

When I arrived in 2019, I did not have the ability to speak French well. However, I had access to the required resources and to encouragement, as well as having a connection with my colleagues. Today, I am a good example.

This motion will cool other MPs' interest, including anglophones, who want to participate in the effort to promote the French language. I understand that Mr. Drouin is not an MP from Quebec, but he is very close to Quebec. He is very determined when it comes to the importance of the French language in Quebec. I think that forms an aspect of this context.

As we know, when a motion is submitted to us, it is impossible for us to study any other matters.

I will give all the committee members something else to think about: my Nova Scotian perspective. In Ottawa, in the House of Commons, it is very easy for me to converse in French with Mr. Samson, Mr. Godin, Mr. Généreux, Mrs. Kusie or Mr. Beaulieu. Usually, I watch the news in French on Radio-Canada. When I come back to the hotel after a long day spent working for my fellow citizens, I am happy to watch the news in French. However, in Nova Scotia, it's difficult to access French programming. When I am in the car, on the road between my office and my home, I normally listen to Radio-Canada, but those resources don't exist in the region. It's not the same context as in Quebec. We must consider Radio-Canada's mandate in terms of the French language as well as the CBC's importance in maintaining journalism in the context of algorithms and artificial intelligence.

• (1000)

It is especially important for people, for my fellow citizens, because I was going to forget to say that the riding of Kings—Hants is very special in the French context. Indeed, it contains the Grand-Pré national historic site and its church, an important site for us, but especially for you too, Mr. Chair, because you are an Acadian.

I will tell a story for all the people here and for Canadians who are watching our proceedings.

Grand-Pré is a national historic site. In 1755, the British Army and the colonial government, whose exact name I forget, declared Acadians *persona non grata*. At the time, Acadians were neutral and did not swear allegiance to the King of France or the King of England.

• (1005)

[English]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Was it the Planters?

[Translation]

Mr. Kody Blois: No, Mrs. Kusie, it wasn't the Planters. The Planters were the people involved after the Deportation.

Mr. Chair, would it be possible to ask Ms. Kusie to say a few words on the subject, but after my speech, because I have the floor right now?

Voices: Oh, oh! (laughter)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Chair, I just want to say that Mr. Blois speaks French very well. In fact, I find him more polite than Mr. Drouin. He may want to become a permanent member of our committee.

The Chair: I was going to say that if I could pick favourites among our members, they would be Ms. Ashton, Mrs. Kusie and Mr. Blois. I mean it.

You, our anglophone colleagues, impress me a great deal. You always make an effort to speak French here, and you are extremely respectful. For the francophones around this table, you have no idea how much your efforts do us good.

Mr. Blois, you may continue, but if you want a lesson on Acadian history, Mr. Samson and I can help you. In the meantime, you were talking about the Deportation and I'm trying to see the link with the motion.

Mr. Kody Blois: It's important. Give me a second to make the link, Mr. Chair.

I also thank Mrs. Kusie very much for her help in this context. The Planters were people, Loyalists, who came to Nova Scotia after the Acadian Deportation. That's it, the link with this motion: A witness defended the cause of the French language in Quebec.

The French language in Quebec is crucial, of course. It is crucial to have a program and initiatives to promote and protect francophone culture and the French language in Quebec. But it's not just in Quebec. It's also in Nova Scotia, because of its francophone population. It's a very special element, as you know.

My argument is very simple. In its important work, this committee must focus on these issues and initiatives, including in my province of Nova Scotia. I hope that if the debate continues during the next meeting, which I probably will not attend, some members submit amendments so that the committee considers the importance of the French language throughout Canada, and important initiatives for Nova Scotia and its francophone population. I am given to understand that Mr. Sampson did so.

French teachers and professors at Université Sainte-Anne are the reason it's possible for me to present my point of view in French today. Every week, I practised three, four or five times in virtual mode, because Parliament offers the resources that allowed me to try and improve my capacity in French.

Mr. Chair, would it be possible to ask the analysts a question? I'd like to know if, in the past, there is a precedent at one of the House committees, where a motion was passed to pull an MP from a committee or to ask a party whip to do so.

• (1010)

The Chair: You want to know if there is a precedent or not?

Mr. Kody Blois: Yes. If there are any, it's very rare. I still think it would be a dangerous precedent.

I'd just like to give a little background so that all members are more familiar with Mr. Drouin and his work at the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, in an international context. He is very dedicated to his work with the APF. He has many contacts with other parliamentarians in Europe and Africa, and I know he travels a lot to create these links. That's something to consider with regard to this motion. Mr. Drouin has many relationships with other stakeholders, other MPs and other people who are also dedicated to preserving the French language around the world. The vote regarding his continuation as president of the APF here in Canada has been held.

In my opinion, this motion is not serious. What's more, it's problematic, because Mr. Drouin is a good ambassador for the French language throughout Canada, but also internationally.

I'll just take a minute to analyze the other aspects of the motion. As chair of a committee myself, the Agriculture and Agri-Food Committee, I understand the importance of following procedures, but it's a difficult role in some contexts. A certain aspect of our work is not clear-cut and is neither black nor white, but rather in a grey area. I am therefore in favour of your work in this context, Mr. Chair, since you have given all the members the details of the procedure to be followed.

I'll raise one final consideration, Mr. Chair. I understand that we only have one minute left before we have to get back to our other parliamentary duties, but I want to remind my colleagues of the precedent that would be set if this motion were adopted. It would be very problematic, in my opinion. Nothing would prevent me, for example, from moving a motion against Ms. Stubbs of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources.

Mr. Joël Godin: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Please wait a moment, Mr. Blois.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Given the hour that has been wasted, the fact that it's 10:15 a.m. and the committee must end its work, I suggest that we not suspend the meeting, but that we adjourn, as you've already done, to facilitate technology and allow everyone to be well informed.

I move that the suspension be converted into an adjournment so that, at the next meeting, we can resume the debate.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

I must therefore stop you, Mr. Blois. Thank you for your enthusiastic comments.

By the way, Mr. Godin, there's no time wasted here, but I take note of what you said.

On the other hand, just before we adjourn, I remind you that we had agreed at the last meeting to take a few minutes today to decide on one small thing, the appearance of Heritage Canada officials for the study. Do I have unanimous consent to extend the meeting by two minutes?

• (1015)

Mr. Joël Godin: Yes. Mr. Chair, we must first rule on what I proposed. After that, we can be available for two minutes to, quite simply, make a decision regarding—

The Chair: I will proceed in reverse, Mr. Godin. First, I'll adjourn the meeting and, next week, we'll hold meeting number 104, resuming the debate in exactly the same place. In my list of speakers, I already have Mr. Blois, if he comes back to finish his speech, then Mr. Samson, and you.

Before we adjourn, though, I'd ask everyone for two quick minutes to decide what we're going to do. Do we want to bring back the Canadian Heritage officials to finish the study or do we want to give our instructions to our analyst?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Are you talking about the post-secondary study?

The Chair: Exactly. We had said that we would talk about it at this meeting, that we would take a little time to decide what we were going to do.

So, what do we do, Mr. Godin? The floor is yours.

Mr. Joël Godin: Actually, Mr. Chair, I'm moving a motion. We have a unanimous motion to bring in the minister by the end of June. I think the minister's testimony is important, as is that of the officials.

The Chair: I already announced that the minister had declined the invitation to return to the committee.

Mr. Joël Godin: Doesn't this go against the committee's unanimous motion?

The Chair: I didn't discuss the reasons for his refusal. I'm just telling you that he declined the invitation to come back to the committee, period. That's all I can tell you.

The public servants are available. Do we want to bring them in to complete the study, precisely before the end of June?

Mr. Joël Godin: I think we need to bring in the public servants, as well as the minister, as was unanimously requested.

The Chair: In order for us to manage all of this with the clerk, let me ask you this: If we can bring in the officials, does their appearance take precedence over the continuation of this debate? For example, hypothetically speaking, would it be okay if they could come next Monday for an hour?

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I think our current debate is important. Before we undertake any further work, we're going to need to make a decision as a committee. I suggest we continue the debate in order to resolve the issue and motion on the table; then we'll work on our primary mission.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Serré, I yield the floor to you, but only on this. I don't want to hear any comments on anything other than this, which is the Canadian Heritage issue. The floor is yours.

Mr. Marc Serré: I disagree with Mr. Godin. I think we need to go back to our studies. I also think we should bring Canadian Heritage representatives to the next meeting and then continue the work we should be doing.

The Chair: I want us to take the first five minutes of the next meeting to talk about this.

So here's what I suggest before we adjourn. On the agenda for the next meeting, it will say that, for the first five minutes, we're going to talk about this. After that, we'll resume the current debate on the motion with, as speakers, Mr. Blois if he returns, Mr. Samson and Mr. Godin, in that order.

Mr. Blois was replacing one of our members, who is recovering from a minor health problem.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'd like some confirmation. You just said that you're adjourning the meeting, but according to the principle you explained to us earlier. That's fine.

The Chair: We will resume the speeches in the order I have just given you: Mr. Blois, Mr. Samson and Mr. Godin.

On that note, the meeting is adjourned.

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