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Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1540)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Colleagues, the meeting is now public.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to move a motion. I think everyone has already received it.

I am moving this motion following a recent ONFR article and an investigation by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, which denounced the fact that a public servant at Public Safety Canada was subjected to intimidation after trying to have his language rights respected. In this case, he had requested documents in French. It's completely unacceptable for an employee to be intimidated—or even discriminated against—because they want their rights to be respected.

We are therefore asking for a study of at least two meetings, during which we will invite the Commissioner of Official Languages, the President of the Treasury Board, the Minister of Public Safety, senior officials from Public Safety Canada, the president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, who has also denounced this situation, and any other witnesses the committee deems necessary.

I think it's really important to do this study, because there have been all kinds of problems related to public safety for decades. Twenty years ago, in a previous life in Montreal, I myself took part in protests when the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada prevented a lawyer from pleading a case in French at the immigration tribunal in Montreal. He was then prohibited from presenting documents in French. After a number of protests, we eventually managed to make our voices heard. That behaviour was a clear violation of the Official Languages Act. That lawyer, with whom we had taken all these steps, told me that he was then able to work in French most of the time, but that it continued to be very difficult for his colleagues.

We have seen the same thing in the RCMP. The situation is really unacceptable: In Quebec, there are no positions for which French is essential. It's hard to imagine what things are like outside of Quebec.

I therefore move this motion, and I assume it will be adopted.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Actually, Mr. Chair, I would like to reserve my right to speak and instead do so after we have finished discussing this motion, so I can go back to another topic.

If you want, you can give the floor to Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, but I'd also like to speak to the motion by Mr. Beaulieu. Would you rather I speak right away or afterward?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Joël Godin: Okay.

I agree with my colleague's comments. I think this study is important. We're dealing with a very specific fact.

I would add that I'd like to expand this study. My riding is home to the Donnacona penitentiary, and I learned that chaplains from Quebec and New Brunswick have to take bilingualism tests. I wrote to the Minister of Public Safety, but, unfortunately, the only response I got was that this was indeed true. I'd like to understand why the rest of Canada doesn't have the same requirement. Until further notice, we're a bilingual country. Since the Minister of Public Safety will be appearing here, I'd like to take the opportunity to ask him about this. For that reason, I wanted to inform my colleagues that I may delve into the subject at the meeting.

I'm wondering if one meeting is—

Mario Beaulieu: The motion proposes that we hold at least two meetings.

Joël Godin: Are two meetings enough? I don't have the answer to that question.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe that when a minister appears, we can ask them questions on all topics, so I don't think we necessarily have to expand the motion.

Joël Godin: I wouldn't want the minister to be taken by surprise; I want him to give me an answer.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: All I wanted to say is that, on our side, we're prepared to support Mr. Beaulieu's motion. That means it could be adopted unanimously.

The Chair: Okay.

Would anyone else like to speak?

No one wants to, so we'll go to a vote.

Is there unanimous consent to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Is there any other business?

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There was a tragic accident in the United States in the New York region. This accident involved an Air Canada plane. Unfortunately, two pilots died. First of all, I would like to offer my condolences to the families. Under the circumstances, I think that's the least we can do.

The president of Air Canada spoke yesterday on social media, specifically on the social media platform X, not to name names. Once again, it was noted that Air Canada's CEO failed in his duty to use Canada's two official languages, a principle that should guide him every day.

We have already heard from him here at the official languages committee. He committed to learning French. I'm not passing judgment, because it's difficult to learn a second language, after all. I understand that. However, he could have used a teleprompter. That would have demonstrated his sensitivity as well as his willingness and intention to respect French and francophones.

I ask the committee members the following question: What can we do? Unfortunately, Bill C-13, which received royal assent in June 2023, didn't give us the necessary means to impose or demand things.

Mr. Chair, I would like to consult the committee members so that we can see what we can do. I think all of us around the table are sensitive to the matter. I would therefore like to consult my colleagues to see what the committee can do to remedy this type of situation.

It would be very simple if the CEO of Air Canada showed some willingness, but he has unfortunately demonstrated, once again, that he didn't have that sensitivity. That's why I'm addressing the committee members, Mr. Chair.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Villeneuve, the floor is yours.

Louis Villeneuve (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I completely agree with my colleague.

For that reason, I would like to table a notice of motion on this.

Would you like me to read the motion?

The Chair: Yes.

Louis Villeneuve: The motion reads as follows:

That the Committee express its strong indignation regarding the unilingual English statement made by the Air Canada President and Chief Executive Officer, Michael Rousseau, following the deaths of the crew members of flight AC8646 on 23 March 2026, which it considers incompatible with the obligations set out in the Official Languages Act and with the expectations of the Canadian public; and,

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)f), the Committee invite Air Canada's President and Chief Executive Officer, Michael Rousseau, to appear for a period of one hour to explain this incident, no later than 1 May, 2026, and that the Committee hear, during the second hour, from experts who can identify legislative solutions that would allow the government to intervene in such situations.

I would also like to have my colleagues' unanimous consent to debate this motion today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

It looks like we have unanimous consent to debate this motion today.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Mario Beaulieu: I had already asked to speak.

The Chair: Yes, but Mr. Deschênes-Thériault's name is before yours on the list. I'm following the speaking order. It will be Mr. Deschênes-Thériault first, followed by Mr. Beaulieu.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank my colleague Mr. Villeneuve for the motion.

First, I too would like to offer my condolences to the families of the victims of this accident.

Second, as mentioned, in a video posted yesterday on social media, the CEO of Air Canada presented a message in a pre-recorded video using English only, even though francophones were affected by the incident. Once again, I think that is a lack of sensitivity and consideration toward French and francophones.

I would say that this is part of a series of incidents concerning French and respect for the francophone over the past five years. Members will recall the episode in the fall of 2021, when over 2,000 complaints were filed with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Yesterday was yet another missed opportunity to demonstrate sensitivity and goodwill.

That's why I am going to support the motion from my colleague Mr. Villeneuve, which expresses the committee's outrage over this incident and which invites the CEO to appear before the members of the official languages committee to explain himself.

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

Mario Beaulieu: When I saw that the video was only in English, I couldn't believe it. It makes no sense. It's almost a provocation. Mr. Rousseau has appeared here at least once. He told us that he was taking French courses every day, but he wasn't even able to read four lines in French. It's a joke. It makes no sense. They should find someone capable of representing them. Representatives from Air Canada came here to challenge the draft regulations on administrative monetary penalties for official languages. I'm not sure, but I think it's really unacceptable.

We can always demand explanations from Mr. Rousseau, but it's really deplorable that we don't have the means to act. I think that the people who see it and the Quebecers who see it will react.

This isn't the first time. A year ago, I think, a businessman on a flight with Air Canada was almost thrown off the plane because he was asking for services in French. Fortunately, he was a very bold man, and he stayed put. A security officer was even sent to tell him that if he didn't agree to be served in English... There were actually other flight attendants who could have served him in French, but he had to agree to be served in English. I think that's really shocking. In my opinion, Air Canada has really done something that it will find damaging.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mario Beaulieu: Quickly, I'd like to extend my condolences to the families of the two pilots, of course.

The Chair: Mr. Villeneuve, the floor is yours.

Louis Villeneuve: I just wanted to add that I also offer my condolences to all the families, obviously.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, you have noted the same thing as I have: All members of the official languages committee are sensitive to this matter. I think this is an issue that needs to be addressed. However, as I mentioned a little earlier, I would like us to add, in the second hour—since the motion was proposed today, I don't have a list of suggested witnesses—experts who can give us instructions so that the federal government can have tools to intervene in this kind of situation.

I don't have the solution. I don't have the key. However, I think this is important. Let us use what we're experiencing to correct the future. We can't put toothpaste back in the tube, but we can improve things in the future. I think we should use an amendment to add an hour to the planned study. That would make it a full meeting and enable us to hear from experts who can guide us on setting up rules to prevent this type of situation as much as possible.

We all understand that, if the CEO of Air Canada had the will, we wouldn't be in this situation. Unfortunately, he doesn't have that willingness or sensitivity toward French and francophones across Canada.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

You're proposing an amendment, then. Is that correct?

Joël Godin: Yes, but I don't have the wording. You understand that—

The Chair: I understand. You're proposing to add—

Joël Godin: I propose adding, in the second hour, experts who can guide us so that we can find tools for the federal government to have the means and power to intervene in this type of situation.

The Chair: Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Since we have an amendment before us, I'll wait for it to be dealt with before I speak.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor to speak to the amendment.

Mario Beaulieu: I support the amendment, but I think that if the government has the political will, it can take action and have an impact on Air Canada. Officials can let us know, but I'm sure that Air Canada has funding, loan guarantees or federal legislation to support it, and that can play a role. We'll see, but I support the amendment.

The Chair: I just consulted the clerk. It would be helpful to have some wording so that we can agree on something concrete and not just on an idea.

Mr. Godin, can you propose some wording?

Joël Godin: I can say the amendment that I'm proposing, and Madam Clerk could take note of it.

I propose that we add a second hour to this meeting to hear expert testimony to help us define measures that we, as legislators, should put in place to enable the government to act in this type of situation, wherever possible, obviously.

• (1555)

The Chair: Madam Clerk, can you read the text you have so that we can make sure we have understood correctly?

The Clerk of the Committee (Madeleine Martin): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The addition would be as follows: that the Committee hear, during the second hour, from experts to help the Committee define measures that legislators can put in place for the government to intervene in such situations.

We could change that wording. It's at the discretion of committee members.

The Chair: Ms. Chenette, you have the floor.

Madeleine Chenette (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): I think we need to shorten the text. The first part was clear, but I would instead write that it's a matter of identifying legislative solutions to take better action in such situations. We could draw inspiration from that.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, can you read the wording that has been proposed by Ms. Chenette?

The Clerk: If I understand correctly, the proposal is to add the following to the motion: "That the committee hear, during the second hour, from experts who can identify legislative solutions that would allow the government to intervene in such situations".

The Chair: Does the committee wish to adopt this amendment?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: We're now back to the motion as amended.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I would like to quickly move an amendment. In the first paragraph, the words “and passengers” should be removed.

The Chair: Does the committee wish to adopt this amendment?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: We're back to the motion as amended.

Does the committee wish to adopt the motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I would like to move a motion to go back in camera, in order to continue our work on the reports.

The Chair: Is it the will of the committee to go in camera?

(Motion agreed to)

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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