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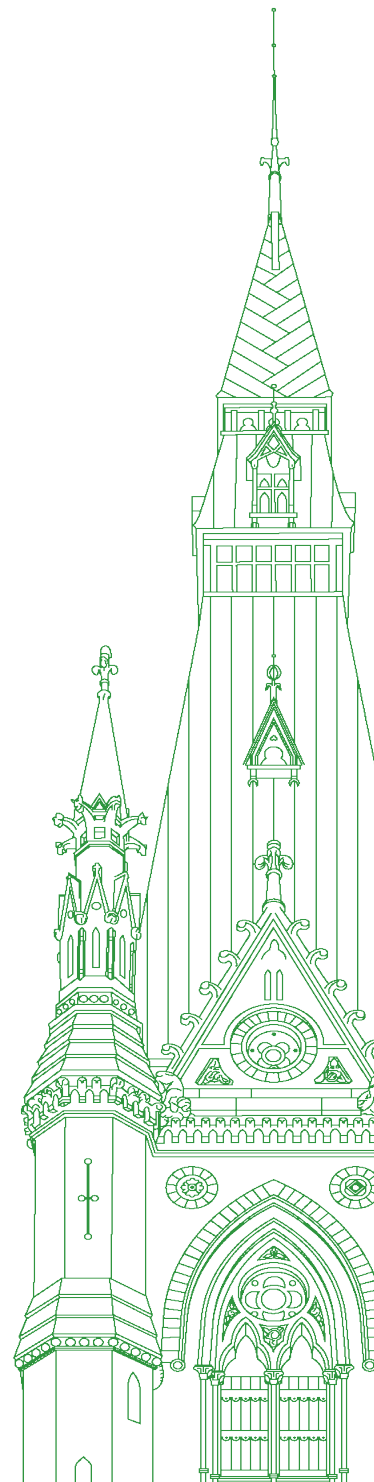
Standing Committee on Official Languages

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Chair: Yvan Baker



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• (1550)

[Translation]

The Chair (Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): I'd like to welcome everyone to meeting number 35 of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted on April 21, 2026, we are meeting today to study the draft regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. We have two representatives of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada: Alain Dupuis, executive director, and Liane Roy, president.

I welcome you once again. You have five minutes for your opening statement. We will then move on to the questions from the members.

The floor is yours for five minutes.

Liane Roy (President, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Committee members, good morning.

Thank you for inviting us to appear to comment on the draft regulations for the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act, commonly known as the UFPBA.

My name is Liane Roy. I'm accompanied by Alain Dupuis, the executive director of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, or FCFA.

You are all familiar with the purpose and objectives of UFPBA. Our purpose today is to highlight the role of UFPBA in supporting the vitality of minority francophone communities. This objective is central to the right to be served in French and to work in that language. The UFPBA also recognizes the diversity of provincial and territorial language regimes and therefore encourages a tailored approach to contribute to the progress toward true equality of French and English across the country.

The draft of the proposed regulations and the accompanying tools set certain guidelines in this regard. However, a number of elements still require improvement.

The criteria used in the draft regulations apply to areas that are recognized as predominantly francophone, but they exclude several regions that have a critical mass of French speakers, as well as communities in rural or remote areas. The same issue arises regarding the minimum employee threshold to designate companies sub-

ject to the UFPBA: In Quebec, there must be at least 25 employees, but elsewhere in Canada, there must be at least 100 employees in regions with a strong francophone presence. Since most federally regulated private businesses are small businesses with fewer than 20 employees, such a threshold will therefore exclude a large portion of the targeted businesses and reduce the actual impact of the act.

We recognize that language obligations can have economic impacts on the businesses concerned. However, if we truly want to promote French, fight against assimilation, and support the vitality of francophone communities across the country, we cannot rely solely on the demographic weight of francophones and target only large companies. This cannot be enough. French and francophone communities are part of the identity and DNA of Canada. Therefore, it is appropriate that the businesses serving these communities and benefiting from them assist in preserving and promoting the use of French.

The FCFA therefore proposes a methodology that, although similar to that of Canadian Heritage, is actually designed to achieve a higher level of accuracy. We propose using a more targeted census scale, that being the dissemination area. By combining it with the threshold of 20% potential demand for services in French, it's possible to capture a greater number of areas with a strong francophone presence.

The Acadian community of Chéticamp comes to mind, which is not captured in the methodology proposed by Canadian Heritage, but is captured by the one we propose. As you know, this is a well-established community, mostly on its own territory, which has its own institutions.

Our approach also includes the designation of provincial and territorial capitals, alignment with designations made at the provincial level in Ontario and Manitoba, as well as the use of vitality criteria such as immigration hubs, historic communities, and the presence of francophone institutions.

Other recommendations include, but are not limited to, setting the minimum threshold at 25 employees for the UFPBA to apply in regions with a strong francophone presence; requiring French-language services in the event of an emergency on public transportation; the obligation to provide the Commissioner of Official Languages with a list of private businesses subject to the UFPBA; reviewing the regulations every five years to keep pace with the country's demographic changes; and the non-reversal principle.

The UFPBA is a new act. There is still a lot of work to be done. This means that this regulation is an opportunity to start off on the right foot and to establish the principles recognized by the UFPBA and, by extension, the Official Languages Act.

Thank you. I'm ready to answer your questions along with the FCFA's executive director, Mr. Dupuis.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Roy. You spoke for exactly five minutes. You set a good example for my colleagues.

We will now move on to the questions from the members.

Colleagues, since we started the meeting a bit late, I'll manage speaking times a bit more strictly to maximize our time.

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

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

Actually, can you cut my speaking time short? It's because I want to table the motion I sent you notice of last week so that we can discuss it now. In order for us, as members of Parliament, to do our jobs effectively, I believe it is important that we have access to all the information the government has gathered in the past. That way, we could draw on it should the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Department of Canadian Heritage have overlooked anything.

We have to remember that Ms. Joly, who was Minister of Official Languages in 2021, was tasked with establishing a committee of experts to review the implementation of the new rights and obligations proposed as part of the modernization of the Official Languages Act. It was announced publicly on March 5, 2021.

I'll read the motion and then present my arguments to you.

Here is the notice of motion, dated May 22, 2026, that I filed:

That, whereas the Honourable Mélanie Joly announced on March 5, 2021, the creation of an expert committee tasked with examining the implementation of the new rights and obligations proposed as part of the modernization of the Official Languages Act;

Whereas the mandate of this committee was to prepare recommendations regarding possible recourses for workers and consumers, as well as the criteria for recognizing regions with a strong francophone presence outside Quebec;

Whereas the committee was also mandated to consult representatives from various accredited unions representing workers and employers in federally regulated businesses, representatives from different levels of government, partners from official language minority communities, as well as leaders of federally regulated businesses;

And whereas, despite the importance of this work, no report or official recommendations have been made public to date;

The Standing Committee on Official Languages order, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the production of documents and records related to the Expert Advisory Committee aimed at studying the implementation of the new rights and obligations proposed in the modernization of the Official Languages Act, and that these be provided within 15 working days of the adoption of this motion.

One of the partners from linguistic minority communities is the FCFA, among others. It's not written in the motion, but it's an additional point I wanted to provide to you.

I think it's important that we be able to use all the data. My colleague Ms. Chenette often says that the government has data and that we should draw inspiration from it.

The announcement was made by Mr. Trudeau's government, while Ms. Joly was responsible for official languages. In fact, she then held the title of Minister of Official Languages, unlike the current title of Minister Responsible for Official Languages. I think that at that time, people were more sensitive to the official languages issue.

I have here the press release announcing the creation of this expert committee. If we want to do our job as parliamentarians properly, I think the least we can do is have that data. We might be able to draw inspiration from it. Treasury Board and Canadian Heritage may have drawn inspiration from it to prepare the draft of the proposed regulations for the UFPBA, but they may not have, and they may have overlooked certain things. As I often say, "You cannot be too careful". I think it would be important for us to have that data so we can work with it and decide what we can do. It would serve the cause of Canada's two official languages even better, in a context where we are reviewing the regulations related to the second part of the modernization of the Official Languages Act.

I invite all the members around the table to agree to my request and to ensure that the officials can submit this report outlining the results within 15 business days.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

I have the names of two members on my speaking list, but before proceeding, I just want to explain to the witnesses what is happening. This may not be the first time they have seen something like this, but I'll explain it so that it's clear for everyone, for those who are here for the first time and those who will be here for the second hour. As soon as a member of parliament proposes a motion, we have to finish up the debate on that subject before we can return to the witnesses. As a result, I'm asking for everyone's patience. We'll see how the debate unfolds. We'll do our best to maximize the time spent with the witnesses, I'm certain of that.

I now give the floor to Mr. Deschênes-Thériault.

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

In a spirit of collaboration, at the beginning of the session, we unanimously adopted a work plan. We agreed that our top priority would be the study of the regulations implementing the modernized version of the Official Languages Act. We don't have many meetings left during the work period before summer, so I think we should focus on the work we have mutually agreed to prioritize.

At this point, I don't necessarily see the relevance of my colleague Mr. Godin's motion. It concerns a 2021 committee whose report was not necessarily intended to be made public. It was to equip and inform the government. The work has progressed since then. The bill to modernize the act was passed. Three proposed regulations or drafts of proposed regulations have been made public in recent months. The context has also changed.

In reviewing the various regulations we have done in recent months, we heard from a range of experts grounded in the realities of 2026. Today, we have witnesses who have prepared to come and present their point of view to us. These people have travelled to be here. I think that, out of respect for these experts, who will be able to enlighten us in our work, that is what we should focus on.

With that in mind, Mr. Chair, I propose that the debate be adjourned.

• (1600)

The Chair: That's a dilatory motion.

I therefore ask you to proceed with the vote, Madam Clerk.

Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Mr. Chair, is the vote on adjourning the debate on this motion?

The Chair: That's correct.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: The debate on the motion is therefore adjourned.

We'll return to the witnesses.

I'll give you the floor again, Mr. Godin. You have the floor for six minutes.

Joël Godin: Unfortunately, Mr. Chair, I will have to take some of my speaking time to respond to the arguments my colleague presented earlier. He closed the debate. Unfortunately, in the presence of a majority government, it seems like we're being silenced more and more, and it's very unfortunate. The proposed motion does not disregard the guidelines that were established when we set our work schedule. This is part of the process to ensure that we can contribute even more effectively to the review of the regulations for the UFPBA.

Now, we're taking shortcuts. I just want to remind everyone around the table that the bill received royal assent in June 2023. Now we're talking about shortcuts and saying that we lack time. However, the government has had three years. When it comes to respect and a respectable process in Parliament, I am very disappointed. However, this is only the beginning, and it foreshadows what we will have to go through in the coming months, since the government now has a majority due to defections.

I'll now turn to the witnesses.

Ms. Roy and Mr. Dupuis, hello. Thank you. You are regulars.

I'd like to know your opinion. When we reviewed this matter in 2023, you were very active, present and involved. In the second part of the modernization of the Official Languages Act, regarding the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act, a proposal had been put forward by the Bloc Québécois. It had been supported by the Conservatives, who then strengthened it, because,

due to a procedural error, the Bloc Québécois had to withdraw its proposal.

Then, at one minute to midnight, on the eve of the vote, the government of Quebec decided to reach an agreement with the Canadian government. Remember that this was during a minority government, and the NDP had clearly indicated that it would vote in favour of the Office québécois de la langue française as the institution responsible for enforcing the French language in federally chartered businesses in Quebec.

My question is simple: Do you think that Jean-François Roberge, who was the minister responsible for the matter in the Quebec government at the time, did a service to francophones across Canada by reaching an agreement with the federal Liberals?

Liane Roy: I don't really have an answer to give you, Mr. Godin.

Joël Godin: I'm going to ask you another question. With all due respect, I don't mean to put you on the spot. We've already had good discussions about that.

I want to know this: to promote the cause of French across Canada, would it have been easier to require all federally regulated businesses in Quebec to be under the responsibility of the Office québécois de la langue française?

Is it the same answer?

Alain Dupuis (Executive Director, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): With all due respect, I think it's up to Quebeckers to decide. We represent francophones outside Quebec. If you have a question concerning our communities and the impact of the UFPBA, we'll be happy to answer it.

• (1605)

Joël Godin: You'd be good in politics.

Alain Dupuis: We don't represent Quebeckers, unfortunately.

Joël Godin: I understand. Unfortunately, Quebeckers did not decide that. It was a Quebec government minister who imposed it, and that's sad. Quebeckers will realize it later, but there are major consequences, in my opinion.

Let's get straight to the point.

In your opening statement, you mentioned that there were things that could be improved in the draft UFPBA regulations. There is, among other things, the absurdity concerning the regions that are not covered. You've clearly demonstrated it. You spoke about the number of employees.

What do you think would be the best rule to determine which regions are eligible? You talked about capitals and schools.

Let's take Halifax, for example. The city of Halifax is not even considered. Federally regulated businesses located in Halifax will not even be required to work in French.

You mentioned another town or village in New Brunswick, that being Chéticamp.

Liane Roy: It's in Nova Scotia.

Joël Godin: Yes, sorry, it's in Nova Scotia.

In Chéticamp, from what I understand, French is the main language used, but statistically, the numbers do not allow it to qualify.

What do you think would be the best figures and the best criteria to ensure the growth of French everywhere in Canada?

The Chair: You have 55 seconds left, Mr. Godin.

Liane Roy: Mr. Godin, for our part, we propose using the dissemination area. As you know, at Statistics Canada, there are different ways to count and collect data. We suggest using the dissemination area, which includes, among other things, between 400 and 700 inhabitants. It's a much smaller scale than the one proposed by Canadian Heritage, which is the census tract and includes from 2,500 to 7,500 inhabitants.

In our opinion, the dissemination area helps to highlight the places where francophones are located more clearly. The minority must be dealt with using different criteria than the ones used for the majority. You can use capitals, too. However, to take all of Canada into account, as you will see in our report, the dissemination area allows for a more detailed geospatial analysis. Marketing businesses use it precisely to be much more accurate in targeting consumers—

The Chair: Ms. Roy, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but Mr. Godin's speaking time is up.

I now give the floor to Mr. d'Entremont for six minutes.

Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Since we're talking about Nova Scotia, I'll continue to talk about Nova Scotia. I would like to thank my friend Mr. Godin for highlighting Nova Scotia.

When you look at the regions of Chéticamp, Argyle and Clare, you see that they are small places with not many services. What positive changes will the new regulations bring? What difference will they make in our regions? What could we change in these regulations to ensure that they will make a difference in our regions?

Liane Roy: Thank you for the question, Mr. d'Entremont. It will allow me to finish what I wanted to say.

Regarding the dissemination area, as we mentioned, it'll really help to better calculate where francophones are located and to take into account more rural or remote regions where there is a concentration of francophones. That's what's important. We'll then be able to ensure that people are served in their language and that they can also work in French. We also see, in the case of francophone immigration, how important it is to offer services and job opportunities in French.

When consulting our report, you'll see that on the map, there are clusters with a strong francophone presence across the country, but they aren't calculated quite the same way as Canadian Heritage calculates it.

The main problem, as you know, since you are from Nova Scotia, is that French speakers are scattered everywhere. It's kind of the same thing for Toronto, which is also given as an example. Toronto is a city, and it is not listed anywhere here, even though franco-

phones also live there; it is the city with the most francophones in Canada, but they do not all live in the same neighbourhood. That's why we need to find other ways to count francophones, and that's why we are also suggesting the idea of including provincial and territorial capitals.

● (1610)

Chris d'Entremont: I have seen this in my 20 years in politics. Services are proposed for regions with a strong francophone presence. The services are not necessarily there.

For example, in Chéticamp, there are no government services. People need to go to Port Hawkesbury. It's the same thing in southwestern Nova Scotia, in Argyle: government services are in Yarmouth.

It's almost the same now for banks or credit unions. They're not in our regions; they're now in the anglophone centres.

How can we work with these organizations and businesses to ensure they have services in French?

Alain Dupuis: Precisely; if we reduce the measurement scale, we will be able to target the small communities that are currently being overlooked. In addition, I think that several communities still have one bank branch or a Bell Canada outlet, for example, like a small store. It's still important for us. If we narrow down the geographical area, we can reach many more of these small communities.

However, I believe that the federal government will also have a role to play in promoting these new regulations and supporting businesses so that they can comply with them.

Chris d'Entremont: Now, let's talk about urban regions. In Nova Scotia, the region with the largest number of francophones or Acadians is the Halifax area, which includes Dartmouth and Bedford. However, this region is not on the list.

How can this be managed when the most francophone region is not currently designated?

Liane Roy: That's partly why we offered you the other calculation system.

Chris d'Entremont: Could you explain it a little bit more? I haven't had the chance to look at that closely yet.

Alain Dupuis: First and foremost, we propose keeping the same 20% criterion, but to reduce the unit of measurement. That's going to include a much larger number of communities.

However, what you are referring to is the reason why we propose adding other criteria, such as including provincial capitals like Halifax, where at least 1,500 francophones live and where there are francophone schools. It's important for us that the capitals are designated because the governments are there, as are a number of headquarters. Many francophone organizations and many post-secondary institutions are in these capitals where there is a core of francophone vitality.

That doesn't mean the entire Halifax area would be designated, but it would be possible to determine a dissemination area, such as a neighbourhood. The goal is to identify where the francophone institutions are in Halifax to ensure that if banks, telecommunications businesses, or transportation businesses, for example, have branches in this dissemination area, people can receive services in French.

The Chair: You have 40 seconds left.

Chris d'Entremont: I don't really have any other questions.

We really need to see what we can do in this region. The schools are there. In the Dartmouth area, I forget the name of the road where everyone is, but the high school and the elementary school are there. We hope that a bank will be able to offer services in French in this location.

Alain Dupuis: Absolutely. That's what we are suggesting.

We know that large cities and capitals are also focal points for francophone immigration. Annually, we already welcome 30,000 permanent residents who speak French in francophone communities. This number will continue to increase. It's important that urban centres are included in the regulations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. d'Entremont.

I'd like to say that I come from Toronto, and I've been trying for years to attract all the francophones to Etobicoke Centre. I haven't had any success. However, if you have any suggestions, I'd like to hear them.

I now give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for six minutes.

Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests.

I think using the dissemination area is a good method. Eventually, it might be appropriate to lower the threshold, say to 15%. I think we should be able to adjust the thresholds with restoration in mind. Rather than changing the indicators, we should lower the thresholds.

The act will apply to federally regulated private businesses that have 25 employees or more in Quebec or 100 employees or more outside of Quebec. You propose that the threshold be set at 25 employees across Canada. I think that's a good thing.

Regarding the certificates for the fostering of French, I know that they are for companies with 100 employees or more. I don't know if, outside Quebec, certificates for fostering French are also required. I think it would be important because it's what would encourage the widespread use of French in a business.

There's another thing I'm wondering about—

• (1615)

Alain Dupuis: Regarding this last point, if you'll allow me, I'd say that the regulations are not clear to us about the procedures for businesses outside Quebec. In Quebec, it's clear that we essentially apply a regime similar to Bill 101, but in the regulations, we do not have the same framework for these businesses regarding French-language committees and reports. Very few reports are required from designated businesses in regions with a strong francophone

presence outside Quebec. These are aspects that we would like to see strengthened in the regulations.

Mario Beaulieu: Even in Quebec, businesses with at least 25 employees but fewer than 100 may be required to establish French-language committees if there is resistance.

I don't want to stray too far from the scope of the UFPBA, but it would've been interesting if the UFPBA applied to federal institutions as well, to ensure the widespread use of French in regions with a strong francophone presence.

Basically, the use of dissemination areas would cover Toronto.

Alain Dupuis: Yes. They would cover many more regions. In our report, you'll see we have maps. We cross-referenced data to illustrate where francophone institutions are located and where the dissemination areas reach the 20% threshold. The Toronto area would partially reach this threshold. The additional criteria we propose, such as the presence of strong francophone institutions and the presence of francophone vitality in certain dissemination areas, would make it possible to designate at least a few neighbourhoods in large centres like Toronto where there would be obligations.

Mario Beaulieu: Basically, if you take Toronto as a whole then there aren't enough francophones. However, if you take different parts of Toronto, there would probably be several neighbourhoods that could rightfully be designated. I think it would be very important.

Furthermore, the Commissioner of Official Languages has no authority over consumers. I think she can only act regarding consumers and services. In the UFPBA, it appears that only the minister is responsible for the process of francization or the fostering of French. So we'll see. However, I think it would be important for the commissioner to be able to conduct investigations on her own initiative, and not only when she receives complaints. I don't know if it's in your proposals.

Alain Dupuis: One of our recommendations is that the list of businesses subject to the Official Languages Act be automatically provided to the Commissioner of Official Languages, not only to facilitate investigations but also to educate and foster French. This is because if everything depends on the minister's political will, we believe that will not be enough.

According to what is currently being proposed, it will be a system based solely on the number of complaints. First of all, if we could know which businesses are subject to these regulations, that would help. According to the regulations that were submitted, no list was provided. In our view, the obligation to provide this list to the commissioner would be a proactive measure.

Mario Beaulieu: I haven't had time to look at this in detail, but if we keep the provision that requires it to be based on complaints, it must be possible to complain anonymously. Often, people don't dare make complaints if they cannot do so anonymously, especially workers. I think it would be good for the commissioner to be able to investigate on her own initiative in places where it's more problematic.

Apart from that, do you have any other suggestions that you haven't had time to mention?

The Chair: You have 45 seconds left to respond.

Alain Dupuis: There are a few more.

We also want a non-reversal principle to be set out in the regulations. In other words, once a region is designated as a region with a strong francophone presence, even if there is a demographic change afterward, we request that its designation cannot be removed when the regulations are later reviewed.

We also want the regulations to be revised every five years to better capture demographic changes. Things can change between one census and another. For example, in the last three years, Toronto has welcomed more than 15,000 francophone immigrants. So, if we wait 10 years to implement the regulations and apply them, unfortunately we will not be able to reach several communities that are seeing francophone demographic growth, from immigration in particular.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu. Your time is up.

We will now begin the second round of questions.

I give the floor to Mr. Gill for five minutes.

[English]

Dalwinder Gill (Calgary McKnight, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The regulations use numbers and percentages to decide which regions outside of Quebec have a strong francophone presence.

In your view, should the government also consider qualitative factors such as French language schools, francophone institutions and the historical presence of francophone communities?

Alain Dupuis: Absolutely.

[Translation]

These are elements that we have included in our proposal. We believe it's important to take into account the historical contribution of communities that had a francophone presence. We need to see how these regulations can revitalize certain regions where French has declined in recent years.

It's also necessary to interpret not only the percentage of francophones but also the absolute number of francophones. As we can see, large cities like Toronto, whose greater area has nearly 200,000 francophones, do not fall within the current definition in the regulations. These francophones also have the right to live in their language, to have opportunities to receive services in French, and perhaps also to work in their language, even in predominantly anglophone areas.

[English]

Dalwinder Gill: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I'll give the floor to Mr. Godin.

[Translation]

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

Joël Godin: Thank you, colleagues.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let's talk about Toronto.

What status has the province granted Toronto regarding official languages?

Alain Dupuis: The city of Toronto is located in a region designated under Ontario's French Language Services Act. As a result, all provincial government services offered to the public in Toronto are also offered in French.

Joël Godin: In your opinion, does the province of Ontario make more effort than the federal government to promote the growth of the French language and culture?

Alain Dupuis: I don't know whether it's making more effort than the federal government. However, since two provinces, in this case Ontario and Manitoba, have French-language service laws that designate regions, the regions designated by the provinces should be taken into account to ensure that the regulations we are discussing cover those same regions.

In other provinces, unfortunately, only the services are designated, not the regions. That's why we talk about it less in our report. However, if there is in fact a law on French-language services and it designates regions as is the case in these two provinces, this should be taken into account in the definition of regions with a high proportion of francophones.

Joël Godin: As I understand it, there are four provinces in Canada that have provincial-level tools to promote the growth of the French language: Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Manitoba. You are demonstrating to me that they are more active than the federal government, yet, the federal government is supposed to preserve bilingualism, English and French, throughout Canada, in all provinces and territories.

Isn't that an aberration?

Alain Dupuis: I think we need to make sure not to mix up government services. The federal government offers government services in both official languages in several regions across Canada. At the same time, we are trying to expand the possibility of living in French and accessing services in French in the private sector. That's the point here. That's the great innovation.

Joël Godin: What I'm saying, Mr. Dupuis, is that tools exist in the four provinces to promote the French language, even within businesses. It's not just in government institutions.

Alain Dupuis: No, the laws on services in French apply only to government institutions.

Joël Godin: Shouldn't we be inspired by this model? In my opinion, the federal government has a greater responsibility. There's a model. There's concentration. These four provinces have realized that French is very important for Quebec; it's the common language. In New Brunswick, it's supposedly equal. There are also the other two. However, the federal government has an additional responsibility to extend the French presence across the country. In fact, it is responsible for stopping the decline of French, promoting both official languages and protecting them.

Shouldn't we take inspiration from this to establish the criteria and broaden their scope?

Furthermore, I'll take this opportunity to remind you that there is an asymmetry. We can't just copy and paste everywhere. In some regions, it's more concentrated, but these are rural areas, which are more isolated and more closed off. I think they should be considered, and the dissemination area could be a tool.

Provide us with more concrete tools so that we can better define how to measure it and expand the French presence throughout Canada.

• (1625)

The Chair: Unfortunately, your time is up.

Joël Godin: I was right to ask my questions.

The Chair: You might have the chance to get answers in a future round.

I now give the floor to Mr. Deschênes-Thériault for five minutes.

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

In one of the answers you just gave, you mentioned the non-reversal principle. Can you tell us more about it? What is the motivation behind this proposal? What would be the potential consequences of this principle?

Liane Roy: The non-reversal principle was implemented by our organization to resist assimilation. Once services are established in a region, we would like them to be maintained there, even if there is a demographic decline. We suggest that it be in place for at least two regulatory review periods, or over a period of about ten years, because we really want to try to counter the chances of assimilation.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: As you mentioned briefly in your previous answers, you propose expanding the number of regions where the UFPBA applies, such as to cities like Whitehorse, Yellowknife, Toronto or Halifax.

Do you have any additional items to add? Why would this proposal be important for French speakers living in these regions? I'd like to understand this proposal a little better, so I'll give you the chance to say a bit more about it.

Alain Dupuis: Like Canadians in general, francophones are increasingly urbanizing. Unfortunately, it's a fact. Many of our francophone regions are also experiencing some decline. Francophones are in the cities. We are increasingly expanding the range of services and the number of francophone institutions in major cities.

If we look only at a large expanse of territory and apply the 20% criterion, that's where what Canadian Heritage proposes does not adequately capture urban realities. If we add the capitals and certain key communities, such as Halifax and Toronto, which are notably immigrant cities, it allows us to track demographic trends as well, which, whether we like it or not, are moving towards urbanization.

We use the same criteria, the threshold of 20%. We're not exaggerating, either. We're keeping the 20% threshold, but reducing the area still allows us to capture neighbourhoods, have a branch in the area, and perhaps also encourage francophones to settle in certain urban areas so that they can also help foster some vitality in the

public space. This is a good thing that aligns with all the sociodemographic and linguistic studies that look at minority francophone areas.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: As you know, francophone communities across the country are becoming more diverse. Moreover, in my riding, some areas are 95% French-speaking. Realities are not the same everywhere. There are regions where the percentage of francophones is lower.

What options does the government have to ensure that this act also has an impact in regions where the francophone presence may be more fragile? How can you ensure that you'll really have an impact in those areas? What lever can we use?

Alain Dupuis: We specifically mention criteria such as the presence of francophone schools. Moreover, in the regulations related to part IV of the Official Languages Act, a few years ago, the government added the presence of a francophone school as a criterion to designate those same federal offices that must offer services in French.

In our view, taking into account French-language schools, day care centres and organizations in these areas—which might not otherwise be designated—still allows us to identify a neighbourhood with a vibrant community, even if the proposed 20% threshold is not met.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: There are several places in the country where provincial laws determine where government services are offered in English and French. However, the idea behind the UFPBA, which applies to federally regulated private businesses, was still quite innovative. It's a model that we did not necessarily have in Canada outside Quebec.

Could you remind us of the significance of this law—which served as the basis for the draft regulation we are currently reviewing and which was enacted several years ago?

• (1630)

The Chair: You have 45 seconds left.

Liane Roy: It will definitely help with the vitality of our communities. It's also very important to give people opportunities to work in their language and access services in their language.

Once you read the report, you'll see what we are proposing to you. I think that by doing things this way, we'll be able to reach several communities, including historical communities. As we said, these are communities that were previously very francophone, but increasingly they're becoming more anglophone, or perhaps have concentrations of other languages. What we're proposing will be very good for the vitality of the communities.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Deschênes-Thériault.

I now give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to talk about the issue of schools, but I'm glad you already addressed it in your answers.

There's also another aspect that I wanted to raise. Implementation of the measure will be monitored through complaints filed with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. However, it will still require a considerable budget. It has often been said that this office did not have sufficient resources to follow up on the complaints it received.

Do you have any specific proposals to increase the budget of the Commissioner of Official Languages so that she can meet the demand?

Alain Dupuis: I think that's a given. If the commissioner has to conduct investigations and follow-ups concerning thousands of private businesses, it goes without saying that she will need to present a budget and request additional funding so that the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages has additional capacity to investigate the cases.

Mario Beaulieu: I think it will also require an effort from you. For people to make complaints, there would actually need to be promotional campaigns. I believe that this responsibility falls to the minister. That said, it's necessary to tell people about the UFPBA and inform them that they can file complaints and that they have the right to services in French. It's also necessary, as you mentioned earlier, to have the list of companies subject to the UFPBA. That's a very good idea. I think it will generate costs, but the effects could be significant.

I would like to remind you that the UFPBA is based on the principle of territoriality, that is, territories with a strong francophone presence. This principle has been proposed for a long time. It follows the model of Bill 101 to some extent. We were often told that it would not be good for francophones outside Quebec. However, we can see that the model based on the territorial approach is actually not bad at all. On the contrary, it does help to counter assimilation in regions with a strong francophone presence and, above all, to integrate people from immigrant backgrounds there.

Alain Dupuis: I would say that there are nuances regarding the principle of territoriality. Territoriality as defined in these regulations does not benefit all francophone minority communities. The proposal we are making, which involves using the dissemination area, allows us to have a system that extends to all provinces and territories. In the current model, several of our francophone communities are unfortunately disadvantaged by the unit of measurement that is used.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, your time is up.

I now give the floor to Mr. Bélanger for five minutes.

Jim Bélanger (Sudbury East—Manitoulin—Nickel Belt, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I see that Sudbury is defined as an eligible region. Do you know if that includes only the city of Sudbury or if it includes the Greater Sudbury area?

Alain Dupuis: Since I am originally from Hanmer, I know the area well.

Yes, this designated region includes a large part of Greater Sudbury, but it does not include the neighbouring riding of Sault

Ste. Marie—Algoma. Towns like Elliot Lake, Blind River, and Sault Ste. Marie, where there is still a significant francophone population, are not covered by the measure. However, if we were to change the unit of measurement to use the dissemination area instead, Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma would be included in the definition of a region with a strong francophone presence.

Jim Bélanger: In this context, I'm trying to see how many private businesses would be subject to this measure. Apart from banks or businesses with more than 100 employees, I can't think of many situations where the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act would apply.

Do you think these regulations will tangibly improve access to services in French in rural communities, where the majority of businesses do not meet this criterion?

• (1635)

Alain Dupuis: That's an excellent question.

Actually, this is why we would also like the number of 25 employees, which is used for Quebec, to also apply to designated regions with a strong francophone presence outside Quebec. A greater number of businesses in your riding would be included in a definition like that.

Jim Bélanger: I'm getting to the topic of assimilation.

It's all well and good to have laws with a little more teeth, but you still have to be able to enforce them.

I've found, based on my personal experience with banks, that it doesn't work. Even though they may advertise that services are available in French, when I arrive at the counter and speak in French, I'm asked if I can come back in five minutes because then there will be someone who can serve me in French, or something like that.

If you want to promote French, live in French, or work in French, you need to have the opportunity to do so. In situations like this, it's easier for me to speak to the bank employee in English because I don't have time to wait to be served in French. This situation doesn't happen only at the bank. This act and these regulations will also impact other cases.

What do you think about this situation? How can we remedy that?

Alain Dupuis: In my opinion, the fact that these regulations will apply to the private sector already represents a significant step forward. It sends the message that French is important and that it's used not only within the family or at school but also in public. However, this needs to be accompanied by other strategies, such as continuing to increase francophone immigration outside Quebec and strengthening access to French-language schools and post-secondary institutions, among other things.

As you know, in your region, many French programs have been cut at Laurentian University in recent years. French programs need to be reinstated so that regions like ours can continue to have more francophones and be able to offer these services in the medium and long term.

Jim Bélanger: Thank you.

If I have a little speaking time left, I'll give it to Mr. Godin.

The Chair: You have one minute and 15 seconds left.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Bélanger

I'll restate in my own words what you said earlier: It's quite unrealistic to apply these regulations and achieve results, because they don't include any reporting requirements, any form of accountability or any control mechanisms. A lot of goodwill is being shown, but once again, it's just smoke and mirrors, and people think that with a wave of a magic wand, everyone will fall in line.

Can you guide us and provide more details on what we should include in the regulations?

The Chair: You have 35 seconds left.

Liane Roy: I think that what is also important is precisely to ensure that there is accountability, as you mentioned.

It'll be very important, first of all, to obtain the list of businesses covered by the UFPBA if we want to be able to do work in advance of any complaints.

As you'll see in our brief, it'll also be very important to establish more designation criteria. As we said, the dissemination area in particular would have to be used.

The UFPBA must also truly be designed to promote French as the language of service and the language of work. The French language must not be relegated to a lesser rank once again. We really need to aim for fairness here. It's a bit—

The Chair: Ms. Roy, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but the time we had is up. I've already given you extra time. Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to the last member to speak, Mr. Villeneuve, for five minutes.

Louis Villeneuve (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hello, Ms. Roy and Mr. Dupuis.

You touched on the subject earlier, but could you explain in more detail the reasons behind your proposal calling for a five-year review of the regulation?

Alain Dupuis: Yes, absolutely.

The good thing is that we're beginning to see the effects of the increases in francophone immigration targets adopted in recent years in the demographics. As I told you, we are at 30,000 people per year. A few years ago, it was around 5,000 or 6,000. Immigration is already revitalizing our communities.

If current thresholds are maintained, there will be 300,000 more people in the Canadian francophonie within 10 years. With that in mind, do we have to wait 10 years to see these demographic changes? A census enables us to assess demographic changes every five years. In that case, why not update the regulations every five years in light of the most recent census data? This way, we could add neighbourhoods and dissemination areas much more continuously and demonstrate a serious commitment to developing services and workspaces in French outside Quebec.

• (1640)

Louis Villeneuve: You also propose strengthening accountability mechanisms, particularly by requiring that the Commissioner of Official Languages be provided with the list of federally regulated private businesses subject to the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act.

Can you provide me with a bit more explanation about that? What motivates a proposal like that? Above all, what would be the potential repercussions?

Alain Dupuis: I believe this committee has already discussed it in recent weeks. The fact that there's no list makes it impossible to reach out to the targeted businesses or support them through the significant transition they will need to go through.

If the department produces a list naming hundreds or thousands of organizations across the country, it will need to be made public and forwarded to the Commissioner of Official Languages, who will then be able to carry out not only her investigative duties once a complaint is filed, but also her promotional duties.

Communities also have a role to play. We could also approach the businesses. When they recruit staff, for example, we could distribute information so that there are bilingual applications. We could promote the newly offered services in French.

It has to be done in unison. It's not something that can be done in silos or in secret. Yes, there is the compliance aspect, which the commissioner will need to enforce, but there will also be a lot of promotional work to do with the communities.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you. Your answer is quite clear.

What mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that francophone consumers can actually receive services in French?

How should potential disputes between a francophone consumer and a telecommunications business or a bank, for example, be handled?

Alain Dupuis: Well, there's a lot of work to do there, as well. Currently, francophones do not expect to receive service in French in public spaces and private businesses. This means that first, there'll need to be a display that promotes these services and promotion campaigns to let the public know. It will also be necessary to create the habit and reflex among francophones to request services in French.

Furthermore, francophones who work in a place where they had not, until recently, been allowed to work in their language will need some encouragement and someone to tell them that they can start adopting behaviours that push the boundaries a little. For example, they can request that their language be respected in the workplace.

Definitely, work will need to be done in terms of promotion among both employees and the public.

Louis Villeneuve: In conclusion, is there anything else we should consider in reviewing the draft regulations?

You have about 45 seconds left to respond.

Alain Dupuis: I'd say that we have pretty much gone over our main recommendations.

It's certain that, on reading the current wording of the regulations, we thought that compliance would largely be based on complaints.

For comparison, with the federal government, there's the Commissioner of Official Languages. Once the problem has already occurred, an investigation is launched, and then corrections are made. Furthermore, Treasury Board and Canadian Heritage are doing a great job with promotion. Treasury Board requires federal institutions to provide triennial reports. There are no equivalent mechanisms in these regulations; there is no obligation for businesses to submit reports. The Department of Canadian Heritage also does not conduct audits upstream to avoid problems before they arise.

This is a big concern and a big gap. We don't have this dual mechanism for the private sector. It'll then be entirely up to francophone activists who will decide to demand their rights. We find it unfortunate that the proposed regulations aren't stronger and don't include preventive mechanisms for citizens.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you, Ms. Roy and Mr. Dupuis, for being with us, for the work you do every day at the FCFA, and for your testimony.

Colleagues, I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes to allow the next group of witnesses to settle in. I would ask that we proceed quickly to maximize the time we spend with the witnesses.

Thanks again.

● (1645) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1650)

The Chair: I'd like to welcome everyone again to the committee meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted on April 21, 2026, we are meeting today to study the draft regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses.

I'd now like to welcome the witnesses.

From the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, we welcome Peter Hominuk, executive director, and Sonia Behilil, director of policy and government relations.

From the Canadian Bankers Association, we welcome Eric Prud'homme, director, Quebec and Atlantic government relations, and Christian Petit-Frère, senior legal counsel.

I thank all the witnesses for being here.

Each organization will have five minutes for its opening statement. We will then move on to the questions from the members.

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

Peter Hominuk (Executive Director, Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for having us here today.

I'm accompanied by Sonia Behilil, director of policy and government relations, as well as Noura Abdi Farah, policy analyst.

The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario has been the organization representing Franco-Ontarians since 1910. We represent 795,760 francophones in Ontario, the largest francophone community outside Quebec.

At the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, we welcome the federal government's intention to bring the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act into force. These regulations are important: They give concrete effect to new language rights in sectors that are part of the daily life of francophones. However, outside Quebec, these rights will depend on a key element: the designation of regions with a strong francophone presence. This is precisely where the main challenge lies for French Ontario. The definition of regions becomes the gateway to rights.

The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario recognizes that the draft regulations already propose an initial list of Ontario regions. This one covers several major hubs of French Ontario, notably in the east and in the north of the province. However, this list should be understood as the minimum standard of protection, not the maximum. It must not be reduced, weakened or interpreted in a restrictive manner.

The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario does not question the use of demographic criteria or census divisions as an administrative basis. These tools are necessary and allow for a predictable and applicable method, but they cannot be the only reference points.

In Ontario, the francophonie does not exist solely in statistical percentages. It also exists in institutions; it exists in service hubs; it exists in employment pools; and it exists in schools, colleges, universities, health centres, community centres, economic networks and transportation corridors.

In some regions, the francophone presence is strong in terms of proportion. In others, it's important in terms of absolute numbers or it provides structure in institutional, economic or administrative terms. This is also what we hear during the États généraux de l'Ontario français. Many historic communities remind us that they exist and contribute to the vitality of French Ontario, but they too often feel invisible within federal frameworks.

An overly strict quantitative interpretation runs the risk of overlooking actual francophone concentrations. It may also underestimate the role of certain areas that act as regional hubs for much larger communities. In this regard, the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario supports the position proposed by the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, particularly when it recommends a more nuanced understanding of the regions and better consideration of provincial regimes, francophone institutions, historical communities and the realities specific to minority settings.

For Ontario, this means that the regulations should avoid introducing a regional designation that would be perceived as disconnected from existing frameworks. This approach does not replace the proposed method; it complements it. It helps ensure better compliance with the spirit of the act, which is not only intended to count francophones but also to protect their actual ability to live, work and access services in French.

We also request that the final regulations or the accompanying tools clearly specify the regions that will be designated. Communities need to know if they are covered. Businesses must understand their obligations. Furthermore, workers and consumers need to know where their rights apply.

If there is confusion between census divisions, territorial designations and public codes, it could directly harm how rights are exercised. A right that is poorly understood becomes a right that is difficult to exercise, and a designation system that is poorly understood is likely to produce the opposite effect of what is intended. Rather than strengthening access to French, it could create areas of uncertainty, frustration and inequality between communities.

Finally, we want to draw the committee's attention to implementation. The system should not rely solely on a person's ability to file complaints. In a minority context, many francophones switch to English out of habit, fatigue, discomfort or because they still do not know that they can ask to receive service in French. If implementation relies solely on individual complaints, it will not fully capture the obstacles experienced on the ground. Proactive, clear and consistent implementation with the recommendations we make in our report will therefore be necessary.

• (1655)

The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario supports these regulations coming into force. We believe they can become an important way to strengthen French in services, workplaces and the daily lives of people in francophone minority communities. However, for this system to truly achieve its objective, the definition of regions with a strong francophone presence must accurately reflect the Franco-Ontarian reality. It is achieved when a francophone person can receive a service, work, be informed and fully participate in the economic life of their region in French, because the system recognizes the reality of their community. It is this consistency, clarity and recognition that these regulations must enable.

The Chair: Mr. Hominuk, you spoke for exactly five minutes too. Perhaps you and Ms. Roy rehearsed together.

Mr. Prud'homme, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Eric Prud'homme (Director, Québec and Atlantic Government Relations, Canadian Bankers Association): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, my name is Eric Prud'homme. I am the director, Québec and Atlantic Government Relations for the Canadian Bankers Association, or CBA. My colleague, Christian Petit-Frère, the CBA's senior legal counsel, is joining me today.

We thank you for this opportunity to discuss the draft regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses.

Before we proceed, I would like to inform you that, late yesterday afternoon, we made the same presentation to the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages.

We welcomed the introduction to Parliament of the draft regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses by the Minister of Canadian Identity and Culture and Minister responsible for Official Languages.

The CBA states once again that the banks acknowledge the importance of Canada's two official languages and that they do their very best to serve their clients in the language of their choice anywhere in Canada. The banks also recognize the critical importance for francophone employees to be able to work in French when they work in a region with a strong francophone presence.

The banks have always done their best to respond to their clients' language preferences. In the regions with a strong francophone presence, such as Quebec, of course, but also New Brunswick and eastern Ontario, the major Canadian banks are already offering personal services in French.

Furthermore, clients anywhere in Canada can access service in French by telephone, online and by using web platforms. Today, more than ever before, the banks' huge investments in technology have put a greater number of simple and practical ways to access financial products and services at the disposal of francophone and anglophone clients. These investments have demonstrably increased the way in which the banks communicate and interact with their clients and conduct their internal operations. As a result, francophone clients can access certain banking documents in French from wherever they are.

Studies show that most consumers use online banking services and banking applications. These technological advances allow them to conduct their banking from anywhere in the country. In parallel, traditional bank branches located in rural communities, both small and large, are still important in Canada's banking network.

The banking sector has lived up to its commitments in terms of the availability of products and services in French and of francophone positions, whether in Quebec or in other parts of Canada.

We feel that it is reasonable for organizations like banks to have a degree of flexibility in applying language requirements to match the nature, the scope and the complexity of their activities, their distribution channels, and the products and services they provide. It must also be remembered that small and medium-sized banks do not have the resources that the larger banks can deploy in response to certain requirements.

Nevertheless, the banking sector is aware of the importance of offering good-quality, well-paying jobs in francophone communities. It will not hesitate to do so when suitable candidates are available to fill them.

We note that some very small areas in some provinces are designated as regions with a strong francophone presence. In those areas, it may well be even more difficult to recruit suitable candidates for certain positions. In future revisions of these legislative provisions, therefore, we recommend tightening the criteria used to designate an area as a region with a strong francophone presence.

As for human resources, the members of our association are in favour of the provisions on exemptions. Nevertheless, our association recommends flexibility in the matter of supervising francophone employees in regions with a strong francophone presence, taking into account the uniqueness of each situation.

Finally, before the requirements come into force, it is essential that there be an implementation period that gives enough time to adapt systems, to train staff and to hire additional employees.

Thank you.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Prud'homme.

I did hear that you testified before the Senate yesterday. The members here are known for asking even more difficult questions. Be ready.

The floor now goes to Mr. Godin, for six minutes.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, my thanks to the four witnesses for joining us today.

I am going to start with the representatives of the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario.

You spoke about the designation of regions with a strong francophone presence. I see that as the key point in your presentation today. I gather that you feel that what is described is the minimum and you would like more to be done.

What does "more to be done" mean for you?

Your mandate is Ontario, of course. The draft regulations identify a number of regions, eight to be precise. What do you feel is missing in the list?

Peter Hominuk: The rest of the province is missing.

Mr. Godin, one of our strengths as Franco-Ontarians is that we live in all regions of Ontario. Some regions are historic in that we have been there for a very long time. These draft regulations completely ignore southern Ontario, where I come from, as well as regions like Welland, Windsor, Chatham-Kent, Sarnia and London.

They are all designated areas under the French Language Services Act and federally identified for services in French. There is also the town of Penetanguishene, where I lived for a long time. The people there would never forgive me if I did not add the town to the list.

So when we look at where the francophone population is concentrated, we see that it is actually scattered all around the province.

At the moment, I am touring with the Estates General of French Ontario and I am in the process of visiting all those communities. The people in those communities are emphatic when they tell me that they feel that the federal government and the province have forgotten that they exist. They feel that they have almost become second-class citizens inside those communities.

• (1705)

Joël Godin: Mr. Hominuk, what you are saying is music to my ears. Aren't you surprised to hear that coming out of my mouth?

What I am gathering is that the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act—the one we are discussing today—does not achieve its objective. As you rightly said, the French language in Ontario is not defined by percentages. As I understand it, much more has to be done in covering the entire area of Ontario so that francophones and francophiles can have access to services in French when they are served in federally regulated private businesses.

Do I understand correctly? Am I reflecting your thinking correctly?

Peter Hominuk: Absolutely.

Some regions that I see as essential have been omitted. They are some of the oldest regions in Ontario.

However, we must not forget large centres, like the cities of Toronto and Mississauga, or areas within Toronto, like Scarborough or Etobicoke, where a significant number of francophones live and where organizations provide services in French. Some institutions, such as the TAIBU community health centre in Scarborough, are set up to provide services in both official languages. Lots of francophone centres in greater Toronto provide services. That kind of organization is flourishing at the moment. It's one of the major attractions in the regions now welcoming huge numbers of immigrants.

Joël Godin: I hear you clearly, Mr. Hominuk; I feel that we are on the same page. I have made careful notes: you want the criteria defining regions with a strong francophone presence to be broadened.

I will now turn to the Canadian Bankers Association.

Mr. Prud'homme, in your remarks, you talked about flexibility. You also talked about the time needed to implement the measures.

First, is two years enough to implement those measures?

Second, what do you have in mind when you say that you want flexibility?

Eric Prud'homme: To answer your first question, I would say that two years seems to us to be a reasonable transition period.

I did not mention this in the introduction because some of you already know the Canadian Bankers Association. But we represent 60 banks from the 80 that are active in Canada. Of those, 40 provide services to individuals, which is what we are concerned with here. So there is competition and it is real.

So two years seems reasonable to us; it's a good start. However, the reality is not the same for all the members of our association. There are very large banks, the ones everyone knows, but then there are also smaller banks that have fewer resources.

That's how I would answer your first question.

Joël Godin: You mentioned that your members provide many services to the Canadian public in many different ways, like on the web. Investments are being made in applications and technology. But unfortunately—and I really do mean “unfortunately”—the technology is often developed in English only.

Think of all your activities, all your means of communication and dissemination to your clients, and all the tools you have in place. Are they 100% in both languages?

The Chair: There are only 20 seconds left, so I would ask you to provide a short answer, please.

Eric Prud'homme: Okay.

We serve clients in the language of their choice. On the digital banking platforms, clients can choose the language of their choice.

Joël Godin: Do you lose French-speaking clients if you do not provide a service in French?

The Chair: Please answer in one sentence.

Eric Prud'homme: The CBA is not involved in operational matters, unfortunately.

• (1710)

Joël Godin: So you don't know.

Thank you, Mr. Prud'homme.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The floor now goes to Ms. Chenette, for six minutes.

Madeleine Chenette (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Good afternoon, esteemed guests and witnesses. Thank you for being here.

I am going to continue the conversation with the CBA representatives, because I did not hear the reply about flexibility. I am interested in knowing what flexibility is. You provided the background but I would like to know more about it.

Christian Petit-Frère (Senior Legal Counsel, Canadian Bankers Association): As an example, let's take the supervision of employees, or more precisely, the supervision of an employee in French. There may be guidelines that say exactly how it is to be done, but some flexibility is necessary. For example, can someone

outside a designated region supervise an employee inside that designated region?

The issue also arises in providing services. For example, if no employee is available to serve a client in person, does that mean that we could make an appointment to ensure that the client is served in French? Does it mean that an employee could be brought from another branch to provide that service?

Madeleine Chenette: Thank you for those explanations.

That is actually one thing that irritates French speakers: having to make an appointment instead of having an employee directly available. I have to tell you that your request for flexibility is somewhat the opposite of what we are trying to achieve here.

You mentioned small and medium-sized banks. I would like to ask how many employees the smallest banks in your association have?

Eric Prud'homme: I cannot give you an answer right away.

Madeleine Chenette: We are talking about more than 100 employees, right?

Eric Prud'homme: Yes, for sure.

Madeleine Chenette: I would like to be sensitive to your concern about small and medium-sized businesses. But basically, that is precisely what we want to encourage: situations where people can be served in French and where companies are able to. I feel that the banks already have much more ability to do so.

What I want to say upfront is that we are turning a corner where, in terms of geopolitics, it is important for Canada to put a value on both our official languages. It gives us a great advantage in attracting investments from around the world. The strength of bilingualism in Canada will be a clearly distinguishing feature of our culture and our strength. So it's time to be more assertive in terms of achieving results.

In that context, I am now going to turn to the representatives from the Association de la francophonie de l'Ontario.

As I understand it, you agree with the statement from the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada when it comes to changing the criteria used to determine which areas are designated,

So let me ask you a quick question: Do you agree with the FCFA's recommendation on the way to determine francophone areas in a designated region?

Peter Hominuk: My quick answer would be yes.

Madeleine Chenette: We were talking about francophone institutions, schools, for example, but Ontario also has francophone companies. Would it be possible to find a way to determine where those francophone companies are, in order to add them to the list? It could actually be useful to add the presence of francophone companies as a criterion, but is it realistic?

Peter Hominuk: Yes, it's realistic.

In 2021 or 2022, the Association de la francophonie de l'Ontario did a white paper on the Franco-Ontarian economy, in conjunction with the Fédération des gens d'affaires francophones de l'Ontario, which the Government of Ontario created. The white paper showed that Ontario has 30,000 francophone or bilingual companies that contribute \$80 billion to Ontario's GDP. I could not tell you how many of those companies are located in southern Ontario, but we know that southern Ontario is the economic engine of Canada and that francophones can be found in all those regions. One difficulty is that business people exist to do business, not necessarily business in French. When some of those companies have the opportunity, they deal with caisses populaires, and southern Ontario has some major caisses populaires.

Madeleine Chenette: If the criteria were to be broadened to account for that reality and to show that the francophone presence is greater, would it help? As the Canadian Bankers Association mentioned, the challenge is to find the time needed for training, recruitment and so on. It's a chicken and egg situation: If we do it, we will have more talent; if we don't do it, we will have less.

Do you think it will help? Is the challenge of finding the talent to provide services actually a brake on rolling out the initiative?

• (1715)

The Chair: You have 35 seconds left.

Peter Hominuk: Southern Ontario has French-speaking postsecondary institutions. We could certainly arrange to look at which programs could be established in order to meet those needs.

We have a fine network of francophone and bilingual colleges and universities. I believe that, as the Franco-Ontarian community, we do have the capacity to train people in a number of areas of expertise.

Madeleine Chenette: Is my time up, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Madeleine Chenette: Thank you very much.

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

The floor now goes to Mr. Beaulieu, for six minutes.

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

The Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act will be implemented first in Quebec and then everywhere else two years later. In those two years, would it not be helpful to establish a process whereby we promote it with companies and consult with organizations? In Quebec, we have had similar measures for 50 years and difficulties still exist.

Peter Hominuk: I look forward to the services being established in Ontario. Of course, it is important for it to be done as quickly as possible, but we also understand that it takes time to establish those services. I really hope that the federal government will be working with advocacy organizations and with those in the regions to start raising awareness, at least to tell the public that, after such and such a date, they will have access to the services that they should have access to. Awareness must be raised with the companies but also with those who use the services. I can't wait to see the services, but I understand that companies will need a transition period and that will take a certain amount of time.

Mario Beaulieu: Of course. Perhaps you could add a request that a process be started ahead of time, even before this act and these regulations come into force.

The issue is in designating regions with a strong francophone presence. You said earlier that some regions are bilingual for federal institutions but are not designated as having a strong francophone presence under the UFPBA.

Peter Hominuk: Yes. In southern Ontario, the federal government provides services in French in certain regions. It's the same elsewhere, all over the province. But those regions do not coincide with the designated regions in the UFPBA. Nor do they coincide with the designated regions in Ontario's French Language Services Act.

One of our concerns is that there are three designation systems for three different things. In some regions, we actually do not know which services we really have a right to. It creates confusion and I am afraid that it may create even more confusion if the UFPBA does not use the same definitions of territory as the Official Languages Act.

Mario Beaulieu: So it would perhaps be a good idea for the UFPBA to use the same definitions of territory as all the others. That would expand the territory.

Peter Hominuk: I imagine that that will be the intent one day. I understand why some regions were used as a starting point more than others. But, for us, we—

Mario Beaulieu: That can be one of your requests.

Peter Hominuk: We could make that request, yes.

Mario Beaulieu: What's the worst that could happen? The request is turned down.

It seems to me that a lot of work will have to be done. Greater Toronto is not covered at all; that's ridiculous. Statistics Canada's dissemination areas could be used, but there may be others too. You talked about places with historic communities, like Windsor and elsewhere. Do not be afraid to send us those requests so that we can include them in our report.

Sonia Behilil (Director of Policy and Government Relations, Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario): For example, I can quote recommendation 3 in the brief we submitted to the committee.

That, when the chosen geographical units mask or could mask genuine concentrations of francophones, complementary methods of designation or application be used in the final regulations to account for the territorial, institutional and functional realities that constitute francophone life in minority situations.

In that sense, we are first raising the question of whether the government will be proactive. In that respect, we are fully supportive of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada and the recommendations and complementary tools that have been proposed. We feel that everything would fit together well and would indeed allow an expansion of the criteria for designation when necessary.

• (1720)

Mario Beaulieu: One thing is important but I have not been able to check it. I have spoken with the FCFA too. It seems that the system will be largely complaint-based. So it is important that complaints be anonymous and that there be recourse for anyone suffering retaliation. I speak a lot about the right to work in French. A lot of employees would not dare to complain. In Quebec, this has been the case for a long time and the legislation has evolved. People used to not dare to complain because they did not want reprisals from their employer.

So first, we need mechanisms to allow for anonymity. Second, employees must have recourse. The minister is supposed to do the follow-up, but the UFPBA has no teeth and no ability to impose fines, as Bill 101 has.

Peter Hominuk: It's a little disappointing that these draft regulations prefer complaint-based mechanisms. In Ontario, the French Language Services Act requires an active offer. I would like to see the idea of active offer reflected in these new regulations. Maybe that will not happen this time, but it certainly has to in the future. We understand that there may be errors in the transition period, the first five years. But that must not become an excuse.

Mario Beaulieu: There is time to look at that as the regulations are being developed. For example, the fact that the commissioner has the ex officio right to investigate would be a fine proposal.

I would like to turn to the bank representatives now.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mario Beaulieu: Are there any banks in Quebec that do not voluntarily comply with Bill 101?

Eric Prud'homme: Most of the major banks have been complying voluntarily with the Charter of the French Language for more than 30 years.

Mario Beaulieu: How about the smaller banks?

The Chair: I am sorry, Mr. Beaulieu, but your time is up. Thank you.

My dear colleagues, we now move to the second round of questions. Given that the meeting started later and that our time with the witnesses was suspended in part, I am going to have to shorten the second round. So here are the times for the members: Mr. Dalton, three minutes; Ms. Mingarelli, three minutes; Mr. Beaulieu, one minute and a half; Mr. Gill, three minutes, and Mr. El-Khoury, three minutes.

After the question and answer period, I will need two minutes to bring an administrative matter to your attention.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I am sorry, but, according to the speaking times you have just indicated, the meeting will finish after 5:30 p.m.

The Chair: Yes, we will be later than 5:30 p.m., but only by a few minutes.

Joël Godin: That's fine. I don't want to lose any more time.

The Chair: I just want to give a little time to the colleagues who had to wait in order to ask their questions.

Mr. Dalton has the floor now, for three minutes.

Marc Dalton: My thanks to the witnesses.

The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario represents 800,000 people. That's a lot of people. It's really a big deal.

I agree that the current proposal masks the concentrations. That's important. As we have heard, for example, Toronto has 200,000 francophones and francophiles.

Do you expect any resistance if the way of applying the regulations is adjusted?

Peter Hominuk: You won't find any resistance from francophones in Ontario if you add regions. But I cannot answer for companies; it's a question for them.

However, I can tell you that, during my touring with the Estates General of French Ontario, people in the trenches have told me that they want an institutional whole. They want a continuum of services. They want services in French from cradle to grave. They want all services in French for all their lives. I like to say that we want to live in French and die in French. We certainly want to be served in French for as long as we live.

In the regions, people are saying yes, that's what we want, that's what we don't have now, and, as francophones, that's what we must have. That will further strengthen the vitality of our communities. Imagine the economic development it will create in our communities if more groups, more institutions, more organizations offer services in French. I see it as a major plus for the Canadian economy too.

Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

I am now going to turn to the representatives from the Canadian Bankers Association.

You talked about technology. Phone apps and websites are all well and good, but what are your thoughts for the future? It's fine to talk about where you are, but you have to know where you are going. I am referring to artificial intelligence because it is really going to change communications in five or ten years.

What do you see as the impact of artificial intelligence in your sector?

That question also goes to those representing the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario.

• (1725)

Eric Prud'homme: In my opening remarks earlier, I described the many ways to deal with banks. We have many services in person. For all major investment decisions—and I am coming to artificial intelligence...

Marc Dalton: We have 15 seconds left.

Eric Prud'homme: Okay.

For all major decisions, people go to a branch. Currently, 10% of the transactions are done in a branch. Branch banking is here to stay. It is really important.

However, 77% of transactions are done with the help of artificial intelligence on banking platforms, with computers, smart phones or tablets. Artificial intelligence will be used to prevent fraud—

The Chair: I am sorry, Mr. Prud'homme, but I have to interrupt you.

The floor now goes to Ms. Mingarelli for three minutes.

Giovanna Mingarelli (Prescott—Russell—Cumberland, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to all the witnesses for joining us today.

I am going to turn to you first, Mr. Hominuk.

As you know, I am the member of Parliament for Prescott—Russell—Cumberland, a constituency that is proud to be strongly Franco-Ontarian. In fact, 60% of the residents are francophone.

Do you hear any evidence from francophone workers in Ontario who hesitate to use French at work because they fear repercussions?

Peter Hominuk: I will let my colleague answer.

Sonia Behlil: Absolutely.

Just a moment ago, Mr. Hominuk mentioned the Estates General of French Ontario. This is a wonderful, historic opportunity for the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario to be in direct contact with professionals who can explain what it is to be made to feel invisible at times, even in the workplace. Or who can describe professional development resources that are not accessible in French or tools that are complicated to find. It is a challenge.

Sometimes, it's a real obstacle because it makes people aware of their own linguistic insecurity and gradually leads them to assimilate or to fade more into the background. It then causes situations such as the ones we are experiencing in French Ontario at the moment. I am sure that you see it too.

Giovanna Mingarelli: In your experience, what actually works in terms of developing language practices in the workplace?

Peter Hominuk: People have to feel that they are in a safe place where they are allowed to speak in French. For me, the institutional culture of a company is the most important factor. People either work in a company where they can speak French or they work in a company where they cannot do so. Even though a company may say on paper that you can speak French at work, if the company's culture shows that you should not, you won't. Basically, that's what will make the regulations successful or not.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 50 seconds.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Okay.

Now, I will turn to the two representatives from the Canadian Bankers Association. Either one of you can answer.

Are your members currently able to provide full services in French in the regions with a strong francophone presence?

Christian Petit-Frère: We did not have the time to do that analysis with our members in designated regions. However, as my colleague said, services in French are offered in a number of designated regions. Examples are New Brunswick, even Ottawa and certain parts of eastern Ontario.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mingarelli.

The floor now goes to Mr. Beaulieu, for a minute and a half.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let's finish what we were talking about before: Can you tell me if any of the smaller banks are not subject to Bill 101? You say that most, if not all, banks in Quebec are.

Eric Prud'homme: Most banks are subject to that act on a voluntary basis.

As for the situation in Quebec, the 45,000 men and women who work in banks work and live their lives in French there.

Mario Beaulieu: That's excellent.

Perhaps some smaller banks or some of the other banks are not subject to that act.

Eric Prud'homme: As I was saying, they are in competition. So if they can serve their clients in the language of their choice, the employees will speak French,

• (1730)

Mario Beaulieu: It will be a free choice between two concurrent language situations. Don't you think that it will lead to a loss of efficiency because of the duplication of oversight and of systems? I feel that any reluctant banks, especially the smaller ones, will turn to the federal program because the legislation is less stringent.

Eric Prud'homme: If I may, I'd like to tell you that, according to my discussions and my information, the banks that are already subject to the Charter of the French Language on a voluntary basis will continue to adhere to the tenets of the Charter of the French Language.

Mario Beaulieu: That's great. That's a good situation. Maybe things will be a little more difficult outside Quebec, but let's hope that everything goes well.

For the—

The Chair: I am sorry, Mr. Beaulieu, but your time is up. We shortened the times in this round.

The floor now goes to Mr. Gill, for three minutes.

Actually, I see that Mr. Godin will be speaking for him instead.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to turn to the representatives from the Canadian Bankers Association.

Mr. Prud'homme, you said earlier that you have good-quality, well-paying jobs and yet, at some point, you may well have problems with French-speaking staff.

In terms of financial services, does the association provide its members with a program to train people and have them grow in French?

Eric Prud'homme: I repeat that the association is not involved in operational activities. However, our members have language policies in place. They also have codes of conduct.

Why do I mention codes of conduct? The gentleman next to me talked about company values. For the banks, the major values are inclusion and diversity, and language is a factor in diversity.

Joël Godin: You know that French is not a factor in inclusion, right?

Eric Prud'homme: I would say—

Joël Godin: French is not a minority either. In a bilingual country with French and English as the official languages, it must be part of a whole. Speaking French is not an exception. It's important to make that distinction.

Eric Prud'homme: What I mean is that it takes buy-in from all the employees, whether they speak English or French. Everything is operational, in fact; they have continuing education programs—

Joël Godin: As an association, do you have a program to encourage your members to do that, or are they already doing it independently?

Eric Prud'homme: The members are already doing it independently and they are doing it very well. As you can hear today, we as an association feel that it is our duty to communicate in French and in English. We have employees who speak French.

Joël Godin: Are you doing better than Air Canada?

Eric Prud'homme: I won't offer an opinion on that, but we certainly—

Joël Godin: Let me clarify my question. Do you communicate with your members half in English and half in French? Are all your communications bilingual?

Eric Prud'homme: I facilitate working groups in Quebec. We also have working groups in the Atlantic region. In Quebec, for example, we do that in French.

Joël Godin: How about in Atlantic Canada?

Eric Prud'homme: That can happen too, depending on the location of the meeting. Yes, we can do it.

Joël Godin: You can do it, but you do not do it automatically.

I understand that it's an operational matter. Okay, that's fine, I don't want to—

Eric Prud'homme: Actually, we have only been dealing with the Atlantic provinces from our office for three months, so I don't really have an answer for you.

Joël Godin: Ah, okay. That's a good reason. So you go ahead, and you can tell them I said so.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 35 seconds.

Joël Godin: Mr. Hominuk, you mentioned an active offer instead of a stick to hit people with. Can you tell us a little more about that idea? I like it, but could you explain it?

Peter Hominuk: The active offer is very simple: when someone comes in, they are asked whether they want service in English or French. It's as simple as that. It's good for business too.

Joël Godin: Yes, it's good for developing business.

But, that aside, you can understand that, when a company does not comply with the legal obligation, there have to be ways of insisting on the obligations and requirements. Is a sliding scale possible?

The Chair: I am sorry, but your time is up, Mr. Godin.

The floor now goes to Mr. El-Khoury, for three minutes.

Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question goes to Mr. Hominuk and Mr. Petit-Frère.

At home in Quebec, la belle province, we firmly believe that the language of Molière brings riches beyond compare to Canada and to humankind.

What efforts have you made, what measures have you taken in your organizations to protect, promote and prioritize the French language? What more do you want Canada to do?

Peter Hominuk: The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario works entirely in French. Our members are 150 not-for-profit organizations and thirty or so Ontario institutions. Everyone stands behind and adheres to our mission, which is to ensure that French has a place in Ontario. That is in our DNA.

We want Canada to help us to ensure that every francophone in Ontario remains francophone for the rest of their days, and that will also be the case for coming generations.

• (1735)

Fayçal El-Khoury: For example, do you have a francization policy for new arrivals to your province?

Peter Hominuk: At the moment, the Assemblée is conducting an exercise called the Estates General of French Ontario. Welcoming immigrants is one of the topics we are delving into with the communities. I would really like to wait until the end of the exercise before I answer your question. However, it is clear that, in all the communities that we visit, people completely understand that French-speaking immigrants are going to play a role in the future of French in Ontario, because they will become part of the Franco-Ontarian community.

The issue now is to put the tools in place in our communities. People are already working hard on integration, particularly in our school boards. A lot has already been done in the communities, but we have to go a lot farther in order to ensure that immigrants are genuinely integrated and that a genuine sense of community has been established.

I will let my colleague finish my answer.

Sonia Behlil: We choose not to talk about francization, but rather about affiliation. At the Estates General of French Ontario, the discussion is about people on different paths, who are having difficulty experiencing the feeling of affiliation with the Franco-Ontarian community. Yet they are fundamentally francophones who use French every day.

Our goal is to ensure that space for francophones in French Ontario is growing, but in addition, to ensure that the visibility and success can be experienced in different ways and with different identities.

Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. El-Khoury.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to thank the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Hominuk, I would like to thank you particularly for mentioning Etobicoke, my region. We do not often talk about it at the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I just wanted to say that. It really shows that you are thinking of the entire province. Thank you for that.

Ladies and gentlemen, as witnesses, you are now free to leave.

My dear colleagues, I would like to take a minute or two to discuss two matters with you.

First, we have not finished dealing with several matters in committee. I propose that we keep the second hour of next Tuesday's meeting to do so in camera. We will be talking about reports and other confidential matters.

Is everyone in agreement?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Second, you have received the media release about the report on part VII of the Official Languages Act. I am going to table that report this week.

Do I have your approval to distribute the release?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mario Beaulieu: I agree, but we provided a dissenting opinion. Is there a way to mention that in the release?

Lucie Lecomte (Analyst): If that is the will of the committee, I can do that.

The Chair: Is it the will of the committee to do what Mr. Beaulieu is asking?

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: No.

The Chair: So we do not have agreement.

Joël Godin: Excuse me, but what exactly are we saying no to?

Mario Beaulieu: He asked whether anyone would object to mentioning that the Bloc Québécois had provided a dissenting opinion.

Is that the question that was asked?

The Chair: Give me a moment to consult the clerk.

A member said no, so it's no.

However, can I distribute the media release?

Mario Beaulieu: I don't understand what he said no to.

Joël Godin: What was the no for? Let's be clear.

Mario Beaulieu: Was it no to the idea of mentioning the dissenting opinion, or no to—

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: It is no to the request to change the media release.

Mario Beaulieu: You said no to the request to change it, right?

In that case, we could send a note of our own.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, could we clarify this? It is not clear to me.

The Chair: Okay, I will start my question again from the beginning.

I have a media release. In all honesty, a media release is normally not something that all committee members have to approve. It's something that the chair can do. However, as we recently did in connection with another study, I wanted to inform you that I was going to send the media release when I go to table our report on part VII of the Official Languages Act. So I wanted to check whether you agree and that there are no concerns as to the text.

Mr. Beaulieu proposed including a reference to the Bloc Québécois' dissenting opinion, which he has sent to the clerk. I therefore asked the members of the committee whether they agreed to mention it in the release, as Mr. Beaulieu had asked. However, unless I am mistaken, I understood that the majority said no.

Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

• (1740)

Joël Godin: Yes, Mr. Chair, I do want to give you my opinion.

In my experience, all previous media releases prepared by committees have been discussed around the table so that we can agree on the content. Sometimes, we decide not to have them. Sometimes, we hold a press conference. You say that it's up to you to approve a media release, but, in practice, it's a shared process the result of which reflects what is said around the table.

As I understand it, my colleague Mr. Deschênes-Thériault is opposed to having a media release in which we would mention that the Bloc Québécois provided a dissenting opinion.

If you can confirm that such is indeed the case, I will ask us to vote.

The Chair: Which question do you want to vote on, Mr. Godin?

Joël Godin: I am asking that we vote on the request to change the release to mention that the Bloc Québécois provided a dissenting opinion.

Mario Beaulieu: I would like to make a comment.

Mr. Chair, if you feel that you have no need for the committee's approval, just send the release. It's your call. If you are asking us to decide, we will tell you what we think.

The Chair: Give me a moment, I will speak to the clerk.

Okay, after my discussion with the clerk, I have two things to explain.

First, in my experience, approving the content of a media release is normally left to the discretion of the chair. I know that it's not the case in all committees, but it is my experience.

Second, in terms of how to proceed, to have a vote as you asked for, Mr. Godin, there has to be an official motion. After the motion has been debated, we can have a vote.

Joël Godin: Yes, we saw that earlier.

The Chair: Does anyone still want to discuss Mr. Beaulieu's request, which was to include in the media release a reference to the fact that the Bloc Québécois provided a dissenting opinion?

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, go ahead.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I just want to make one thing clear.

I feel that the committee has succeeded in reaching a satisfactory report with everyone on board. So we have a concern about including that reference in the media release. The report contains a dissenting opinion, but it is not a substantial one. It does not express fundamental dissent with most of the recommendations. Instead, as I understand it, we wanted to draw attention to the fact that the report reflects consensus around the table, despite some points on which the Bloc Québécois provided a dissenting opinion. That is why I said no to the request to include it in the media release.

Furthermore, the practice is that decisions on releases are usually the prerogative of the chair.

So basically, it's not a major problem. It's just that, in terms of the work we all did, I found it somewhat of a pity to highlight the dissent rather than the content of the report.

The Bloc Québécois is always able to rise in the House to explain the points of dissent in the place where the report will be tabled.

That's my opinion. I just wanted to make it clear.

• (1745)

The Chair: The floor is yours, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mario Beaulieu: I will see. If we are made aware of the precise time when it will be introduced in the House, we may be able to do that. We could also issue a release of our own.

I certainly recognize the efforts that were made. My dissent is not to everything, just to one specific point.

So we will see.

I am not blaming the chair for involving the committee on this. But you reacted, Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, and we have our opinion too.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Chenette.

Madeleine Chenette: In order for our first reaction not to be taken the wrong way, I would just like to repeat that we worked together so well. We all agree that the regulations pertaining to part VII of the Official Languages Act have to be worked on. We totally respect the fact that you have a dissenting opinion, Mr. Beaulieu, but we want the journalists reading the release to see that we are all working together to apply that pressure. But if we state that there was dissent in the media release, they will all jump on that and not look at the rest.

That was the constructive spirit in which we reacted. I said to myself that you are going to make your position known anyway. Personally, I say that we can put the reference in the release. But I urge you to consider the fact that it will not have the effect we wanted to create from the start, which is to urge Treasury Board to really work on it. So it's better to send the message that we are all together on this, despite a few little hiccups. That's the key message.

So if you want to indicate your dissent, we can indicate it. But that's the spirit in which we reacted. I really wanted to explain that so that our intention is not taken the wrong way.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I understand my colleague's comment and I thank her for it.

But I feel that it is of prime importance for each party to be responsible for communicating what it wants to communicate.

Additionally, the release already states that the committee dissents. It states that, after hearing from many witnesses, the committee feels that Treasury Board must revise the draft regulations. I don't have the wording of the release in my hands, but I feel that that is what it states. I see that the analyst is checking right now.

Lucie Lecomte: Yes. I have it in front of me. Is this what you are talking about?

Joël Godin: Doesn't it say something about a majority of witnesses?

Lucie Lecomte: Yes. It's a question from the committee.

Joël Godin: So it says that.

Madeleine Chenette: So we agree.

Joël Godin: No, what I am saying is that, in my opinion, the release already indicates unanimous dissent from the committee. We dissent in that the committee is asking Treasury Board to do its job better. That's the request we heard.

Now, it's up to Mr. Beaulieu to express disagreement. As a parliamentarian, I will always defend the right of parliamentarians of any party, ours or any other, to express their views. So if we do not indicate in a media release that there was a dissenting opinion, I feel that we are trying to have it both ways. That scares me. Mr. Beaulieu is accepting the consequences of the position he is taking. That may be positive for his party, but it may also be negative because there is dissent already. But it's his choice.

That's the basis on which I do not understand the objection that my colleague Mr. Deschênes-Thériault raised. I feel that the reference to a dissenting opinion should be mentioned in the release.

Having said that, I am not going to tear my hair out over this. I have said my piece.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Chenette.

Madeleine Chenette: I feel that the media release is to announce the work we did together. The strength of our report is that we all agree that work needs to be done. We have a lot of recommendations. We certainly recognize the varying opinions among the witnesses, but we stand together to declare that we will get things done.

The impact of that message will be very powerful. Journalists will see that we are all in agreement in making those recommendations. If we state in a media release that there is dissent, the effect will be different. Once again, each party can choose to express a dissenting opinion. I understand that and I am certainly not going to say that it must not be done. But if we put it in the release, it's what the newspapers will carry. That would be unfortunate.

So I am inviting you to think about it. Clearly, there is dissent and we can indicate it. But we just want the work we have done to have an impact. So we were thinking that we could agree that the media release would not mention the dissenting opinion in the knowledge that Mr. Beaulieu and the Bloc Québécois are certainly going to highlight it elsewhere.

We are not going to be tearing our hair out on our side either. I just wanted to have it clearly understood that it is not just Mr. Deschênes-Thériault's opinion, but it's why we said no.

• (1750)

The Chair: The floor is yours, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mario Beaulieu: Our dissent was about Quebec, in the sense that we feel more has to be done for Quebec. Our dissent is not directed towards francophones outside Quebec. We support all the report's recommendations for them.

I just want to go back to one point. Earlier, I would like to have intervened but I did not want to waste the witnesses' time. Mr. Godin's proposal would not waste our committee's time. It was just about asking for documents. His motion does not propose that we do an additional study. I just wanted to say that, because I was not able to say it earlier. I feel that we are better off letting people say what they have to say, rather than relying on a majority to close down the debate.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

So, what does the committee want to do? We have a media release written by our analyst. It is in your hands.

Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Chair, I will leave it to you to choose how to proceed as you wish. We will look at our options. Someone had a good idea: I could certainly rise in the House to indicate what our dissenting opinion refers to and to emphasize that it is not about everything in the report. I recognize that the report reflects that considerable effort was also made for Quebec. But I have one point of dissent that you could not get behind even if you wanted to.

The Chair: So are you letting me choose?

Mario Beaulieu: We are letting you choose.

Joël Godin: That's what you said at the outset, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, we are back where we started.

I think that's all. The meeting is adjourned.

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