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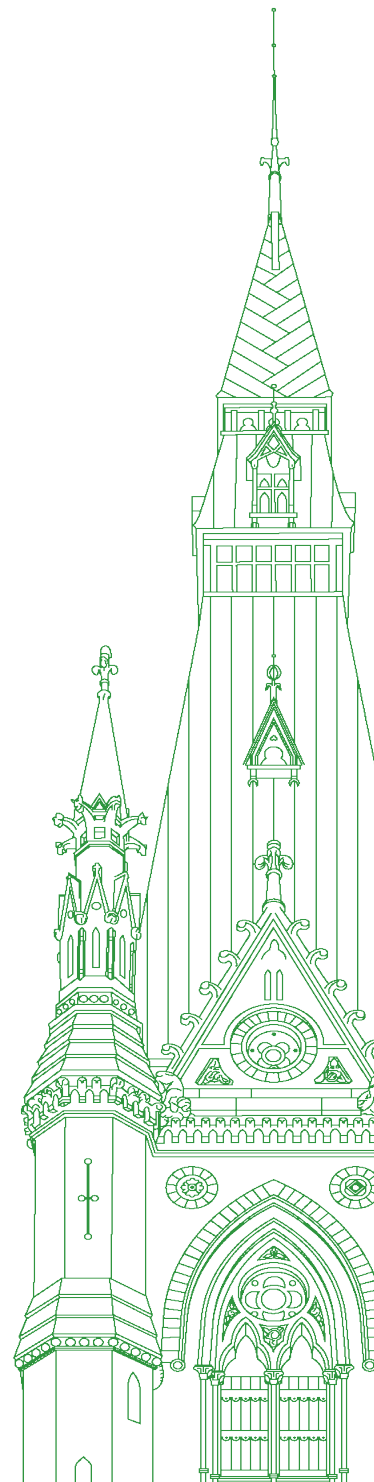
Standing Committee on Official Languages

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Chair: Yvan Baker



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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 36 of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted on April 21, we are meeting today to study the proposed regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. From Droits collectifs Québec, we have Etienne-Alexis Boucher, chief executive officer, and François Côté, general counsel. Both are joining us by video conference. From the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse, we have Jules Chiasson, chief executive officer, who is appearing in person. Denise Comeau-Desautels, the organization's president, will join us later by video conference, so for now, we just have Mr. Chiasson, but we are glad to have him here in person.

Each organization will have five minutes to deliver an opening statement. We will then proceed to questions from members.

We will start with Mr. Boucher.

Etienne-Alexis Boucher (Chief Executive Officer, Droits collectifs Québec): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to say hello to all the members of Parliament on this august committee, including the chair, the vice-chairs, all committee members, and the member for Brome—Missisquoi, whose riding is in the Eastern Townships, where Droits collectifs Québec is based. This region is home to the town of Cowansville, where my beloved mother comes from.

Parliamentarians, I will make a very brief statement. You are no doubt familiar with Droits collectifs Québec, whose mission is to protect and advocate for the collective rights of Quebecers, including their language rights. We have been in operation since 2019. Over the years, our work has extended beyond Quebec matters. Advocating for the language rights of Quebecers has led to frequent collaboration with various types of organizations from the Canadian francophonie, including the Fédération des associations de juristes d'expression française de common law and the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak to the draft regulations.

The Chair: Is that it? Are you done, Mr. Boucher?

François Côté (General Counsel, Droits collectifs Québec): I will carry on from here.

The Chair: Okay.

François Côté: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Parliamentarians, it's an honour for me to appear before you.

We are here to talk about the draft regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses. Right from the outset, we would like to say that—

The Chair: I'm sorry to cut you off, Mr. Côté, but may I ask you to speak a little bit slower please? We have interpreters interpreting your remarks and sometimes, if people speak fast, it can be a bit hard for them to do the interpretation.

François Côté: Okay. Far be it from me to give our hard-working interpreters a headache. I'll slow down.

The Chair: Thank you.

François Côté: I'll start by saying that Droits collectifs Québec is strongly against the draft regulations when it comes to Quebec's jurisdiction. We will not speak to the relevance and potential value of the draft regulations to protect the French language and the language rights of workers to earn their living in French in federally regulated businesses outside Quebec, where the draft regulations will fill a certain legal vacuum, albeit in a very sector-based and geographically and demographically limited manner.

However, we believe that in Quebec, the draft regulations unnecessarily duplicate the Charter of the French Language. On top of that, the regulations are in conflict with the charter as they propose a language monitoring and protection regime that is significantly less effective than the charter in a number of key areas. Quite frankly, we see the draft regulations as a calculated effort by the federal government to encroach on Quebec's political and legal autonomy on language matters by seeking to counter the legal impact of the Charter of the French Language, which does apply—

• (1535)

The Chair: I'm sorry Mr. Côté, but I have to cut you off.

We have a technical issue. I'm going to suspend for a moment. Please stay on the line. I have stopped the clock. We'll get back to you shortly.

• (1535)

(Pause)

• (1535)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Mr. Côté, I'm sorry, but the interpreters are having a hard time hearing you. The sound quality is poor. Someone from the technical team will call you to try and resolve the issue.

My suggestion to the committee would be that Mr. Chiasson make his opening remarks and then we will come back to Mr. Côté, in the hopes that the issue will have been resolved.

Does that work for you, Mr. Côté?

François Côté: We have done a sound test twice, but all right. I'll wait for your technical team.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

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

Jules Chiasson (Chief Executive Officer, Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse): Mr. Chair and members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages, it is a pleasure and a great privilege for me to appear before you today on behalf of the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse for your study on the draft regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses.

The organization, which was founded in 1968, has 29 member organizations, including 12 regional organizations, 15 provincial organizations and 2 institutional organizations.

The Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse welcomes the draft regulations that the federal government wishes to implement concerning the use of French in federally regulated private businesses. Implementing regulations to require federally regulated private businesses to provide services in French represents tangible support for the Official Languages Act and for existing measures to support official language minority communities.

However, we believe several important questions remain unanswered regarding the application of these regulations.

First, how should a federally regulated business subject to these regulations be defined? Will the regulations apply in the same way to francophone minority communities as to Quebec's English-speaking community?

It is important to recognize that francophone minority communities are at greater risk when it comes to maintaining and developing their language and culture. Large national businesses could reasonably make efforts to provide services in French to the public and a French-language work environment for their employees without incurring excessive costs.

The federal government could help advance these efforts by providing financial assistance or support measures to these businesses to facilitate the delivery of services in French and the creation of French-language workplaces. It is not necessary to require that every location of a business in a designated area always provide services in French and maintain a French-language workplace. A more practical approach would allow businesses to choose one or several

locations where services in French would be provided. The local francophone community would quickly identify these service points and could therefore fully benefit from services in French, as would the business's francophone employees.

The number of regions identified as having a strong francophone presence under the criteria in the draft regulations on the use of French in federally regulated private businesses are insufficient to have a truly positive impact on Nova Scotia's Acadian and francophone community.

However, while the inclusion of Digby, Yarmouth and Richmond is certainly a step in the right direction, the regulations could more accurately reflect local francophone and Acadian realities by specifically recognizing the municipalities of Clare and Argyle and the francophone community of Isle Madame located in Richmond.

The Chéticamp region should also be included in the draft regulations. The Acadian community in this region has just been given a protected provincial electoral district. This recognition is the result of extensive community mobilization that went all the way to the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia to ensure appropriate political representation.

• (1540)

The city of Halifax should be an area where the regulations apply. Today, Halifax is a main francophone population centre in Nova Scotia, with between 15,000 and 20,000 francophone residents. The city is home to eight Acadian schools of the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial and a campus of Université Sainte-Anne. In addition, 14 provincial francophone organizations are headquartered in Halifax. The city is also home to the Alliance Française and Canadian Parents for French. Social and recreational activities are offered in French regularly throughout the year.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Chiasson, but your time is up. I gave you some extra time, but I have to cut you off now. I suggest that you share the rest of your remarks during the question period.

Colleagues, technicians are working with Mr. Côté. Representatives of Droits collectifs Québec have about two and a half minutes left for their opening remarks. In the meantime, I suggest we move on to questions from members.

Mr. Boucher, I'd like to give you time to speak if you wish, or to supplement your opening remarks.

You have the floor, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

We could still hear Mr. Côté, but the volume was a bit low.

The Chair: I understand, but we didn't have interpretation. That's the problem, unfortunately.

I suggest we give Mr. Boucher time to supplement his remarks if he'd like to, but I'd like us to move on to questions from colleagues due to time constraints.

Etienne-Alexis Boucher: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a bit of a shame because Mr. Côté and I had split up our roles. After all, he's a doctor of constitutional law and the author of the book entitled *Le droit linguistique au Québec* and he has extensive expertise to speak to Droits collectifs Québec's perspective on the draft regulations.

He mentioned that the regulations overlap with the Charter of the French Language. I would like to add that currently, the federal government does not have an agency similar to the Office québécois de la langue française, which has the expertise to regulate business operations and compliance with the language regime. The federal government is imposing a redundant piece of legislation, yet Quebec has an agency with all the necessary expertise in this area.

As Mr. Côté noted, we have serious reservations about the draft regulations as currently drafted.

● (1545)

The Chair: I'm sorry about the technical issues, Mr. Boucher. As I said, technicians are working with Mr. Côté and I hope he'll stay on and we can hear his answers to questions from committee members.

Before we move on to questions, I'd like to welcome Ms. Denise Comeau-Desautels from the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse. Our technicians have been working with her to ensure she can deliver her testimony. Our technicians have been pretty busy today.

Welcome, Ms. Comeau-Desautels.

Denise Comeau-Desautels (President, Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse): Good afternoon.

The Chair: Colleagues, we will now proceed to the question period.

We'll start with Mr. Godin for six minutes.

Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Chair, please restart the clock because my microphone was not working.

I'd like to take this opportunity to make the following statement concerning the technical issues we're experiencing. I'm not attacking any organization or individual, but things tend to run more smoothly when people appear in person. I do understand that witnesses are allowed to appear virtually, but unfortunately, we can't hear Droits collectifs Québec clearly. The president of the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse could not deliver her opening remarks, while Mr. Chiasson, who is appearing in person, was able to do so without any problem.

I just want to put that message across. There are limited opportunities to appear before parliamentary committees and I think appearing is a great opportunity. I would recommend that witnesses take advantage of this opportunity and appear in person.

I like what you said, Mr. Chiasson. You are pragmatic. You are not asking for services in French from coast to coast or in every corner of the country. You have said that there should be some designated branches so that Canadians can receive services in French. However, how should this issue be handled? Do you have any suggestions for indicators on parameters or guidelines that could be incorporated into the regulations?

Jules Chiasson: Examples could include using the criteria used for federal agencies. For example, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP, got in touch with us in Halifax to ask about the best location for their offices to serve the francophone community in the Halifax region. That was very much appreciated and we are trying to put that in place. Obviously, it's the same thing in rural areas.

We could use that model.

Joël Godin: You said the RCMP consulted you to identify the best locations.

Were you consulted when the proposed regulations on the use of French in federally regulated businesses were drafted? Did the committee of experts select your organization?

Jules Chiasson: No.

Joël Godin: Okay.

Here's the issue. I have a document provided by the Treasury Board Secretariat after a briefing with this committee concerning the different regions that do not meet the criteria of regions with a strong francophone presence because they do not meet the 10% population threshold established by Treasury Board.

Unfortunately, your province of Nova Scotia does not appear in the exceptions. You listed a number of cities. I have in mind a former colleague from Isle Madame, and I can assure you he would express his indignation if he were here. I had the pleasure of serving with him on the committee. Isle Madame has a concentration of francophones, but it doesn't have the 10% threshold and so it doesn't qualify. That's unfortunate.

This week, the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada told us about the dissemination area.

I'd like you to give us some tools. For example, Halifax is not even on the list and yet Halifax is a francophone population centre and the capital city. The city is home to eight schools, a campus and 14 francophone organizations. However, federally regulated businesses are not required to offer services in French to this population. That is rather odd.

● (1550)

Jules Chiasson: Yes, I agree with you.

Joël Godin: How can we address this? How can we incorporate a solution into the draft regulations? Give us some tools to help us persuade the government. I hope the government and the members across will try to press harder and listen more closely.

Jules Chiasson: I agree with the proposal made by the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada. All provincial and territorial capitals should be included. The organization has also recommended using geographical units of 400 to 700 people and preserving historic francophone communities, such as my village of Chéticamp.

The proportion of the francophone population in a given area varies depending on the size of the territory. The whole of Inverness county has a lower population, but if we take the new electoral district, the proportion of the francophone population comes to 36% of the population, which would be sufficient for the designation of a region with a strong francophone presence.

Joël Godin: As far as I know, Nova Scotia is not a bilingual province. New Brunswick is the only bilingual province in Canada.

Jules Chiasson: Correct.

Joël Godin: Now, the community mobilized, and Nova Scotia created an electoral district that has been designated as francophone. It is rather odd that the draft regulations do not have cities in that area that are required to provide services in French.

Jules Chiasson: I agree 100 per cent.

Joël Godin: Can a smaller area be used in the calculation? Can other criteria be used, such as the presence of a francophone school or school board, whether Catholic or not? Give us some actionable recommendations because this situation doesn't make sense.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Chiasson, but time is up. Please answer in one sentence.

Jules Chiasson: We agree with the recommendations made by the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, including all the points Mr. Godin has just raised.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

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

I know about my colleague Mr. Godin's passion.

Mr. Chiasson, I'm going to ask you an open-ended question. You can take all the time you need to answer.

What are your thoughts about the regions with a strong francophone presence in the draft regulations? We spoke about them earlier, but I'd like you to expand on that.

Jules Chiasson: As mentioned in our report, we agree on the three suggested regions. However, I think Halifax and Chéticamp should definitely be included. Other fairly large cities, such as Sydney, Truro and Yarmouth should also be included. The city of Yarmouth is in Yarmouth county. Truro and Sydney have fairly sizable francophone populations. The two schools in those cities have 350 students and they are already running out of space. There is a sizable francophone community.

We're not saying that private businesses should be forced to offer services in French in all their branches, but at least one location should offer these services. If the branch is easy to find, the community would know where to go to receive services in French in the designated area.

Louis Villeneuve: I saw my colleague Mr. d'Entremont nodding as you were speaking. If these cities or regions were added, what immediate impact would that have on the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse and on communities?

Jules Chiasson: Clare, Argyle, Chéticamp and Richmond are among the historic Acadian regions of Nova Scotia. Over the years, the communities have mobilized and demanded to have French-language schools and services. That includes communities in Truro and Sydney, Annapolis Valley and Bridgewater, which is in Nova Scotia's south shore.

Organizations are fighting to protect and develop French and the Acadian culture in 12 regions. Adding another element like that will enrich these regions and help them to continue to live in a French-language environment and to protect and promote their language and culture.

• (1555)

Louis Villeneuve: What criteria, including qualitative criteria, should be considered in the designation of regions with a strong francophone presence?

Jules Chiasson: We agree with the recommendation by the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada about communities with 400 to 1,600 francophone inhabitants. Capitals should also be designated. Historic francophone communities, which include my native village of Chéticamp, should be protected and the presence of francophone institutions should be used as a basis for determining areas for designation. There are francophone institutions in the 12 areas I just mentioned.

Louis Villeneuve: What challenges or advantages do you foresee with respect to harmonization among the various components of the federal language regime, particularly parts IV and V of the Official Languages Act and the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act?

Jules Chiasson: That's a big question. I think that the use of French in federally regulated private businesses would simply support the other components of the act and the other services that were introduced by the Official Languages Act. It would enrich communities and support their development.

Louis Villeneuve: Finally, in what way, if any, could implementation of the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act strengthen ties between federally regulated private businesses and francophone minority communities?

Jules Chiasson: It would definitely be a sign of respect for francophone and Acadian communities. As I said in my opening remarks, we are not asking for all branches to provide services in French. I'm sure that if we go to Halifax and ask a bank about the number of its francophone employees, we would find some francophone employees. Services in French could be offered in one branch, and not scattered across the whole city. The branch should be easy to find and that is where one would go for services in French. I can guarantee that people would use these services.

Louis Villeneuve: In closing, if we could grant you one wish, what would you choose?

Jules Chiasson: I would like action on the recommendations made by the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse, including the recommendations that take Chéticamp, Halifax and Truro and Saint-Denis in particular into consideration in the draft regulations. These cities have a fairly large francophone community because of the size of the community education centre.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

Mr. Côté, I know that our technical team has been working with you. Please speak for 10 seconds and we'll do a sound test on our end.

François Côté: We believe the draft regulations are a calculated effort by the federal government to encroach on Quebec's political and legal autonomy on language matters by seeking to counter the legal impact of the Charter of the French Language in Quebec's areas of jurisdiction.

The Chair: Thank you Mr. Côté. It's working well.

Do you have a point of order, Mr. Beaulieu?

Mario Beaulieu: I think Mr. Côté has less time because of the technical issues. Can we give him two minutes to wrap up?

The Chair: We started with questions from members to give the technical team time to work with Mr. Côté. I gave his organization extra time when I asked Mr. Boucher to speak on behalf of the organization. I did give their organization five minutes, just like the other witness.

I can assure you that I've been fair.

That said, members can ask questions and ask for more details after hearing from witnesses.

Mario Beaulieu: Perfect.

The Chair: You have the floor for six minutes.

• (1600)

Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Côté, would you like some extra time to quickly wrap up your remarks? If not, I have some questions for you.

François Côté: Thank you very much.

I will refrain from commenting on the technical aspects.

Let us now turn to the point I wanted to make.

The draft regulations truly constitute an infringement on Quebec's political and legal jurisdiction regarding the French language. Remember, while the draft regulations may have positive impacts outside Quebec, they disregard Quebec's jurisdiction and the authority granted to the province by the Charter of the French Language, which has already been fully applicable to federally regulated private businesses since 1977 following the adoption of the Charter of the French Language and explicitly and clearly under Bill 96, which explicitly states that the charter applies to federally regulated businesses.

The draft regulations do not fill any legal vacuum in Quebec. They create a legal problem for the sake of petty constitutional politics and to establish a language monitoring regime that is less effective than that provided for by the Charter of the French Language.

Quebec has 370 federally regulated private businesses with 50 or more employees, according to 2025 figures from the Office québécois de la langue française, or OQLF. Of these, more than 350 are properly registered and comply with the OQLF's francization requirements. Only 12 of them are non-compliant. We must therefore not see a problem where none exists. The regime proposed by the draft regulations would apply only to private businesses with 100 or more employees, thereby depriving workers in businesses with 25 to 99 employees of all their language rights in one fell swoop.

We also take issue with the fact that enforcement of the draft regulations will be entrusted to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, a highly respectable institution, but one with no experience in supporting private businesses. The Commissioner of Official Languages oversees the public sector.

However, the OQLF has 49 years of expertise in supporting private businesses. This expertise would be sidelined in favour of a regime that provides for neither monetary penalties nor the power to issue orders, whereas the OQLF does. The regime does not provide for the power to investigate *proprio motu*, that is, on its own initiative, whereas the OQLF holds such power. We would therefore have to wait for a complaint to be filed, rather than monitoring situations of concern. Unfortunately, in businesses, complaints are simply suppressed, often due to pressure and the habit of switching to English. There is no corrective action because no one dares complain.

Finally, the draft regulations also raise the entire issue of the opt-in or opt-out clause. The current provision is the default application of the draft regulations, unless a business requests an exemption and to be subject to the Charter of the French Language regime. The regulations are, on the surface, intended to respect Quebec's constitutional jurisdiction, but I see that as a smokescreen. Indeed, how many businesses will choose to be exempted from its application? I doubt there will be many.

The draft regulations thus create a legal problem where none existed and prevent Quebec from exercising its own jurisdiction in accordance with the impairment doctrine recognized since the Canadian Western Bank decision. I see this as an attempt by the federal government to encroach on Quebec's language-related jurisdiction. Our official recommendation is to remove Quebec from the scope of the regime set out in the draft regulations, or, at the very least, make it an opt-in regime.

Mario Beaulieu: I also asked about the powers of Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages. There is no provision for monetary penalties. I was told that the commissioner has order-making powers, but apparently no power to levy penalties. What are your thoughts?

François Côté: This power to make orders is a power to make recommendations. These recommendations are followed on a voluntary basis.

However, if they are not followed voluntarily, it will be up to the individual who filed the complaint to go before the Federal Court and sue the company to obtain the desired remedy.

This places the burden of enforcing the law on the shoulders of the individual, the low-level employee or the small-scale customer who is alone against the machinery of government and turns to the commissioner, who, despite all their good will, has very limited powers, and so, ultimately, if the business says it has no interest in following the commissioner's recommendation and continues to act in violation of the regulations, it will be up to the litigant to go to court as an individual.

This is therefore very positive [*Inaudible—Editor*] regarding access to justice.

• (1605)

Mario Beaulieu: There is some ambiguity here. You mentioned 350 businesses with 50 or more employees. I believe the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act, or UFPBA, is meant to apply to businesses with 25 or more employees. However, there are no francization committees for these smaller businesses.

François Côté: That is correct.

Mario Beaulieu: Unlike Bill 101, there is no mechanism in place to impose committees for the fostering of French—to use the wording in the UFPBA—on employers who need them but are reluctant to comply.

As for the list of employees or federally regulated businesses, that will remain at the minister's discretion. The minister will be the one to negotiate agreements, to decide whether or not Bill 101 applies to federally regulated businesses and to decide whether or not to publish the list of businesses.

It is obvious that there are two competing regimes. I think this will lead to additional costs and efficiency issues.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, I'm sorry to cut you off, but your time is up.

Colleagues, we'll now move on to our second round of questions. I'm going to be fairly strict with time, because I want us to finish the second round on time.

Before moving on to the next member, I'd like to welcome Ms. Kusie, who is visiting us today.

Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you.

I began my career here on Parliament Hill, on the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I am very pleased to be back, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That's great; it's a good sign.

Stephanie Kusie: What's more, I'm from Alberta.

The Chair: That's great; it's a good sign for our careers, too.

Let us now move on to the second round of questions.

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. I have to say I'm not very familiar with the language situation in Quebec, but I

do have a question for the representatives of Droits collectifs Québec.

How could federal policies better reflect the language reality in Quebec, where French is the majority language but may still be vulnerable?

François Côté: Thank you for that question.

First, there is the federal government's respect for the status of French in Quebec, which is vulnerable and under threat simply because of its geographical location in North America. That's a fact, and it has been recognized since the most recent legislative amendments to the Official Languages Act.

The first step would be to show greater respect for Quebec's autonomy and jurisdiction, and to respect the legislative autonomy and jurisdiction of the Quebec National Assembly regarding the protection of the French language, rather than seeking to create parallel regimes. When it comes to protecting French in Quebec, the Quebec legislature is best positioned to create a tailored language regime.

That said, in matters falling under exclusive federal jurisdiction, namely federal institutions, the modernization of the Official Languages Act is a step that should indeed be welcomed, although its implementation remains questionable. However, when it comes to the private sector and private businesses, my recommendation would be to let the Charter of the French Language do its job. Also, if this solution is unacceptable, you should, at the very least, truly model your federal regime on the regime of the Charter of the French Language. However, this is not currently the case. It is a lesser, watered-down regime that has less power and fewer penalties, and is less efficient and effective.

Consequently, the first solution would be to let Quebec do its job. If you insist on absolutely superimposing your regime over Quebec's, the second solution would be to at least adopt the Quebec regime and ensure it is more effective.

Jim Bélanger: Thank you very much.

I will direct my next question to Mr. Chiasson, since Nova Scotia is a better reflection of our situation in northern Ontario.

What are the main challenges Acadian and francophone communities face in accessing federal services and services from private businesses in French?

Jules Chiasson: A lot of work needs to be done when it comes to the offer of service and agencies, both with respect to the active offer and improving available services.

As for private businesses, I think there is a lot of work to be done; this needs to be fully developed both here and in your riding. I think this is definitely worth exploring. Some businesses are making efforts, albeit minimally. I think we can encourage and support them. I believe that eventually, there will be positive benefits, both here and in your riding, for the community.

• (1610)

Jim Bélanger: Okay, thank you.

Has the modernization of the act improved the situation on the ground?

Jules Chiasson: The modernization of the act has brought some progress, especially with regard to francophone immigration. We still have a long way to go if we truly want to develop and restore the communities to the demographic weight we had in 1971. We're working extremely hard on that front with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and with the province to try to increase the number of francophone immigrants here. There's still work to be done.

Jim Bélanger: Thank you.

I'd like to come back to a comment Mr. Côté made about parallel regimes.

I see that the numerical criteria do not adequately reflect reality. Something occurred to me while you were speaking. Perhaps it would be better if the francophone federations and associations in the regions determined which regions need services. What do you think about that?

Jules Chiasson: I think that would be an excellent idea. I think we're well positioned to do so, and we experience this every day. We work with organizations in the regions and really see the work on the ground and what we need.

We're currently conducting a study on the state of the francophonie in Nova Scotia and it will be released next fall. We have a lot of work to do, but we're on the ground to do it.

Jim Bélanger: I agree. You are in a better position than anyone else to decide.

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

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

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

After three meetings, I finally have the chance to speak about Nova Scotia, with the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse, my key partner on matters pertaining to the francophonie and Acadians in Nova Scotia. Hello, Jules and hello, Denise.

I've been working on francophone issues in Nova Scotia for 25 years. We're really trying to designate different regions across Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia's history means we're far apart, but language and culture bring us together.

Mr. Chiasson, can you say a few words about the distance between the regions across the province and the challenge of providing services in French within the government and in the private sector?

Jules Chiasson: I'm going to give a little historical background. When the Acadians came back to Nova Scotia after the expulsion, the English-speaking government made sure that they were scattered all over the province so that they would not have any political heft. That is exactly what happened. Today, Acadians can be found from one end of the province—in Baie Sainte-Marie, in Argyle—to the other—in Cheticamp and Richmond. There's even an Acadian community in Sydney. We are really scattered. The image we use is that we keep the province afloat on the sea because we are at both ends. It's an eight- or nine-hour drive from one end of the island to the other. We are very far removed from each other.

In terms of communications, some regions have no cellphone service. If you are travelling around Tor Bay, for example—a new Acadian community—you will get completely lost if you rely on your GPS, because it disappears halfway. You have to know where you are going. So communication service has to be improved.

In terms of education and provincial and federal services, things are difficult because it's not about one community, it's about 12 communities.

• (1615)

Chris d'Entremont: Nova Scotia's French-language Services Act really tries to identify the various regions.

Now we find ourselves up against a real difficulty: the largest francophone region in Nova Scotia at the moment is Dartmouth, across from Halifax. How can French-language services be provided there currently?

Jules Chiasson: First, Halifax is a major city for national and international gatherings. Some of those gatherings are bilingual because national or international institutions take part. There's also a whole community, with 15,000 or 20,000 people and eight schools. We are scattered all over the place. So many activities are now happening in French that I cannot attend them all. There are 14 organizations there.

As for private businesses, we are in the process of bringing those 14 organizations together in a work space in downtown Halifax. It's being done in stages. Eventually, the campus of the Université Sainte-Anne will be located there. We also would like the companies setting up shop in the Maritime Centre to be able to provide services in French. Actually, that would be an ideal opportunity to enact this bill.

Chris d'Entremont: The other problem I see at the moment is services in those regions. As Ms. Comeau-Desautels knows, there are not many federally regulated businesses around Argyle or Clare. Those regions do have some banks.

What type of services would we like to have in those regions? I have to include the Annapolis Valley because of the military base at Greenwood.

Jules Chiasson: The Greenwood area may well be starting to grow, given that the armed forces are expanding. Halifax is a major city, one of the biggest in Canada, certainly one of the biggest in eastern Canada. We clearly have to provide services in French in very specific locations so that the community can access them.

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

The floor now goes to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question goes to my friends from Droits collectifs Québec.

The new act, quite reasonably, requires French to be promoted in Quebec. Were you consulted about the draft regulations? To your knowledge, did anyone reach out to any organizations in Quebec?

François Côté: We were not consulted before these current meetings. To our knowledge, no civil society organization was consulted. Generally speaking, in the light of the studies and research we have conducted, we found no cases in which the federal government or any of its departments has held any consultations with civil society, despite the requirement to that effect in the new version of the Official Languages Act. In a word, the answer is no.

Mario Beaulieu: Another issue is that the whole process, not of francization per se but of fostering French under the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act, does not fall to the Commissioner of Official Languages, but to the minister. The minister applies the act and can issue certificates for fostering French and so on.

What do you think about that? Does that not open politicians up to conflicts of interest when they directly steer the process?

François Côté: Yes, it does open the door to conflicts of interest, but it mostly opens the door to fragmentation and division of effort, which could run the risk of plunging the act's effectiveness into insignificance. By that, we mean that if the process involves having to play ping-pong from one institution to another before anything happens, months, perhaps even years could go by before the draft regulations have any real effect.

Once again, we feel that the project would be better off if it were closely revised in terms of internal consistency. In any event, it should not just apply to Quebec.

Mario Beaulieu: Excellent.

Mr. Chiasson, we have talked a lot about all the details and the need for it all to be strengthened. When we look at the history of the Acadians in Nova Scotia and such, we do not hear nearly enough about all the laws that prohibited education in French. So francophones voluntarily assimilated in Nova Scotia.

What do you think?

• (1620)

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, your time is up. Unfortunately, I have to interrupt you.

Mr. Chiasson, I am therefore asking you for an answer in one sentence.

Jules Chiasson: Historically, we had to fight, even to go to court, for our language rights. However, we have made a lot of progress in the last 10 years. Currently, I feel that we are on a positive track in terms of developing the community, the language and the culture.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Dalton, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you.

Mr. Chiasson, let me thank you personally and your organization, the Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse, for the struggle, the battle, you are leading and for the success you are having. It's a major challenge and we can see the progress.

Can you talk a little about immigration and its impact on the francophone community? Do you have any figures on it?

Jules Chiasson: In the last year, francophone immigration improved nationally. I think that the target of 9% francophone immigration was attained nationally, meaning in communities outside Quebec. However, in 2025, only 0.9% of French-speaking immigrants came to settle in Nova Scotia.

We are having difficulty recruiting them, in part because we really don't have the support of the province in doing so. We work with the provincial government on it.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada are supposed to be helping us to recruit and, above all, to retain French-speaking immigrants, but the help is still modest. In the Atlantic provinces, the retention rate is 73%, but in Ontario, I think that the figure is around 90%.

So we have problems of retention and of recruitment.

Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

I am going to give the rest of my time to my colleague, Joël Godin.

Joël Godin: Thank you, my dear colleague.

Mr. Côté, I have a question for you.

You said earlier that Quebec should be left alone to do its job. I agree with you completely.

Now, if you have been following this matter closely, you know that, when it was worked on a while ago, the position of the Conservative Party, the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois was clear. The position was that, in Quebec, all federally regulated businesses must be subject to the Office québécois de la langue française. Then, a minute before midnight, Jean-François Roberge, Quebec's minister at the time, came to an agreement with the federal government, a Liberal government at the time, to allow two programs.

Do you find that appropriate?

If you have any doubts about what I am saying, you can check with people from the New Democratic Party, people from the Bloc Québécois and ourselves. It got a lot of coverage in the papers. I would like to know what you think about it.

François Côté: You are asking for an opinion that is essentially political. So I will yield to my CEO.

As I understand it, I believe the Trudeau government basically forced the minister's hand. Did Minister Roberge really have any choice? The federal act was going to be passed anyway. Don't they say that "the moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on"? How much freedom of action can we say the government of Quebec really has?

I will hold my comments and yield the floor to my CEO.

Etienne-Alexis Boucher: I don't have a lot to add. We simply feel that the draft regulations will not result in any improvement in the status of French in federally regulated private businesses. This is because they already comply with more stringent regulations. As a result, French has not declined in Quebec as it has in the rest of Canada.

Joël Godin: Let me put the question another way.

When the Official Languages Act was being modernized, if a requirement had been added to part II that Quebec companies were subject to the Charter of the French Language, would that have been a solution?

• (1625)

François Côté: Yes, simple as that. It would have been a no-brainer.

Joël Godin: I have another question.

We are faced with a *fait accompli* today and your counsel wonders whether Minister Roberge was perhaps forced to do it because of pressures from the federal government.

I have completely forgotten my question because I am rushing for time.

Ah, yes, I was going to ask you whether it is possible to change the rules and clearly write into the act that the Office québécois de la langue française will have the mandate to enforce the regulations. In effect, the mandate would be for Quebec only.

The Chair: I need a one-sentence answer because the time is up.

Etienne-Alexis Boucher: Let's be funny and say that the National Assembly can do anything except change a man into a woman. I feel that the House of Commons is also set up to do anything. So, yes, it could amend the act so that the Charter of the French Language would apply.

Joël Godin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Ms. Mingarelli, the floor now goes to you for five 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 start with you, Mr. Boucher. In your view, are the regulations for the Use of French in Federally Regulated Businesses Act equivalent to the ones for the Charter of the French Language?

Etienne-Alexis Boucher: The short answer is absolutely not. As we have written, this act goes much less far. It affects fewer businesses and it provides for no penalties for failing to comply with the act. So no, it's not equivalent at all. As Mr. Godin said, that was announced in advance.

Giovanna Mingarelli: In your view, is the federal government within its rights to adopt legislation and regulations in an area of its jurisdiction?

Etienne-Alexis Boucher: I will let my colleague Mr. Côté respond.

François Côté: We are facing an issue of an overlap of, not to say an encroachment into, areas of jurisdiction on common areas. In language matters, where does the jurisdiction lie? If we are talking about the rights of companies located in Quebec, the jurisdiction, under the Constitution Act, 1867, is with Quebec.

However, the federal government is using its indirect jurisdiction with federally regulated private businesses to invoke the impairment doctrine to encroach on an area of federal jurisdiction. Both governments have jurisdictions here and, in this case, Quebec should have the right to legislate over its own affairs.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chiasson, are you satisfied with the draft regulations in their current form?

Jules Chiasson: I feel that the draft is heading in the right direction and that it can be of some support to us if we can really be assured that federally regulated private businesses are able to provide services in French.

However, it does not go far enough in designating regions. I feel that there is a way to provide services without it becoming too much of a burden for the companies. As I mentioned in my presentation, a branch in a major area like Halifax can provide services in French and it wouldn't cost any more. All French-speaking employees could be brought together in one location. There could even be a French-speaking workplace.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Do you have any changes or amendments to suggest to the committee today?

Jules Chiasson: Yes, I certainly do. If the recommendations that the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, the FCFA, submitted to you on Tuesday, May 26, could be implemented, I feel that they would be a huge help in designating regions.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you.

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

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Okay.

In the draft regulations, how do you feel about the suggested regions with a strong francophone presence?

Jules Chiasson: I feel that, when we talk about regions with a strong francophone presence, we are talking about 20% of the francophones. That number goes down if we include more regions, which is what we have to do.

If we really want to have an impact, and if we are sincere in saying that we want the act to be good for the francophone and Acadian communities and to help them, we must include all regions with a francophone or Acadian presence, as marked by a social and recreational life.

• (1630)

Giovanna Mingarelli: Could you tell me your first reaction to the suggestion that the FCFA has made to our committee in terms of the dissemination areas?

Jules Chiasson: We support the proposed recommendations that the committee received from the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you.

That's all from me.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mingarelli.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all the witnesses for being here, for their work and for their evidence.

Colleagues, we are going to have a short pause in order to change our group of witnesses. The other witnesses will join us in a few minutes.

Thank you, everyone.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1630)

The Chair: Colleagues, we'll resume the meeting.

Welcome back to meeting number 36 of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

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

I'd like to welcome our new panel. From WestJet Airlines Ltd., we're joined by Lyne Chayer, vice-president, guest experience and vacations, Quebec; and Tristan Joannette, legal counsel.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks. We'll then move on to questions from the members. You have the floor.

• (1635)

Lyne Chayer (Vice-President, Guest experience and Vacations, WestJet Group, WestJet Airlines Ltd.): Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for inviting us to appear before you today. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the work of this committee, particularly its role in promoting English and French and the vitality of official language minority communities.

My name is Lyne Chayer. I'm vice-president, guest experience and vacations, Quebec, for the WestJet Group. I am joined today by my colleague Mr. Tristan Joannette, legal counsel at WestJet.

At WestJet, we call our passengers guests. This choice reflects our desire to create a welcoming, respectful and humane experience where everyone feels welcome. In the Canadian context, this means providing quality service in both English and French, among other things.

Earlier this week, we had a constructive discussion with the members of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages on many of the issues that bring us together today. We are pleased to continue that discussion with the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[English]

In recent years, WestJet has undergone significant changes. The integration of Sunwing Airlines operations into WestJet, completed

in May 2025, transformed our network and expanded our presence in several markets.

[Translation]

This integration with Sunwing represents not only a significant opportunity but also a responsibility. It leads us to review our practices, harmonize our methods and improve the experience offered to our French-speaking guests. It's in that context that WestJet has undertaken significant work to strengthen its French-language services, work that's already well under way in several areas of our operations. This work includes the flight experience, communications with guests, documents intended for travellers, services offered at airports and, more broadly, the overall travel experience. For us, it's not just a regulatory obligation but also an important part of the guest experience and the relationship of trust we want to build with French-speaking travellers across the country.

Allow me to provide some examples of the measures WestJet has implemented over the past year to improve its French-language services. We've taken steps to ensure that all flight attendants based in Montreal and those assigned to our seasonal base in Quebec City are bilingual. We've also updated our procedures for on-board announcements to increase the presence of French during the inflight experience. We've also updated the menus offered on board and the magazine provided during flights to ensure that the importance, appearance and accessibility of the content in both English and French is equal. We've improved the technological experience in French, particularly on our website. We've also improved the French-language services provided by phone. We've also reviewed and improved our signage procedures at airports. Internally, we're continuing to develop new language policies, including a general language policy and a policy on the use of technologies in French. We're also continuing work to establish a French language committee, in collaboration with our union partners.

This work is ongoing, but our commitment is clear and lasting. We want to continue making concrete progress to better meet the expectations of our French-speaking guests. Francophone communities, whether in Quebec, Acadia, Ontario, western Canada, the territories or elsewhere in Canada, expect to be able to travel and interact with Canadian carriers in their language. WestJet wants to continue being a constructive partner in the implementation of this new regulatory framework under the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act and the draft regulations we'll be discussing today.

• (1640)

[English]

We also believe it is important that any regulatory framework in the area remain practical, flexible and adapted to the operational realities faced by airlines.

[Translation]

As we look to the future and consider WestJet's growing need for a bilingual workforce, we believe it's essential to continue promoting bilingualism across Canada and to strengthen access to French education and training from coast to coast. We see this challenge as a shared responsibility, and we want to continue working constructively with governments, communities and our partners to advance French-language services in the airline industry.

In conclusion, we're proud to be here today and to contribute to your discussion.

Once again, thank you for having us. We'll now be happy to take questions from members.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chayer.

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

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here. It's always easier, from a technical standpoint, when witnesses attend the meeting in person. We appreciate it.

Ms. Chayer, without getting into any trade secrets, could you share some percentages? How many French-speaking clients do you currently serve, including Sunwing clients?

Lyne Chayer: Thank you very much for the question.

In fact, we can't give you an exact percentage, but the overall situation is as follows: WestJet is headquartered in Calgary and was obviously better known in western Canada than in the east. Sunwing Airlines had a national presence and was well established in Quebec, and its flight attendants, pilots and co-pilots were assigned to the Montreal and Quebec City bases.

Today, most of our French-speaking clientele is located in Quebec, but there are obviously French speakers all across the country. That's exactly why we're talking about the draft regulations today. At WestJet, the current percentage of French-speaking clients is lower, but we expect considerable growth in the future across Canada, particularly in Quebec.

Joël Godin: How many employees does your company have? How many of your employees speak French, whether they're bilingual or unilingual? Do you have any unilingual French-speaking employees?

Lyne Chayer: To be honest, no, we don't have any unilingual French-speaking employees.

Joël Godin: Okay.

Lyne Chayer: Currently, at WestJet—which includes the newly acquired Sunwing—we have 16,000 employees across Canada. Obviously, following the COVID-19 pandemic and the adoption of remote work, we now have employees in Vancouver all the way to the Atlantic provinces. We've begun work to try to gather data

about our employees and find out how many of them are bilingual and how many—

Joël Godin: Can you give us a number?

Lyne Chayer: Unfortunately, we don't have any figures, but the work is under way. We've conducted a survey of our employees.

Joël Godin: However, you don't have any results at the moment.

Lyne Chayer: Actually, the hard part is that there are employees who will clearly say they're bilingual, but we'll need to dig further to find out if they can speak and write it.

Joël Godin: You want to know their level of French.

Lyne Chayer: We continue—

Joël Godin: That works for me, Ms. Chayer. Since my speaking time is limited, I must interrupt you.

When you acquired Sunwing, I believe you closed the crew base in Quebec City. Is that right?

Lyne Chayer: Yes, we closed the Quebec City crew base. It was announced in March of last year. However, we've reopened it on a seasonal basis. Given our increased operations at the Quebec City airport in the winter, from December to April, we reopened the base. The pilots, co-pilots and flight attendants who had been assigned to the Montreal base were able to reapply. We operated throughout last winter with a base in Quebec City.

Joël Godin: My understanding is that all employees based in Montreal and Quebec City are bilingual.

Joël Godin: Are you looking to develop the French-language market?

Lyne Chayer: Absolutely.

Lyne Chayer: Absolutely. It's a very important market for us and it's really growing. That's precisely why we're doing all this work. I even gave you some examples earlier. We're continuing to develop the market to build that client base.

Joël Godin: You gave examples, but just as a consumer, I went on Google to visit WestJet's website. However, I didn't even have the option to see the French version.

You said that you'd taken many steps. However, since you want to develop a market, may I offer a small piece of advice? Your website should perhaps be in both English and French. Do you know what I mean?

Is that a mistake?

You changed the menus on the plane, but if there are no guests to read the menu, the marketing doesn't serve much purpose. Do you understand?

Is the francophone market that important to you?

• (1645)

Lyne Chayer: Absolutely. Actually, the website is in French. You have to scroll all the way to the bottom of the page to choose the display language. We're currently revising our website to make it more user-friendly. Often, I think we're—

Joël Godin: I just saw it. You're right.

Lyne Chayer: Often you see the option to display in either English or French in the upper-right corner of the web page. We'll be changing it.

Joël Godin: I just saw it. I'm sorry, I don't want to create confusion, but your webmaster should make that change if you want to develop the French market.

Having regulations certainly adds obligations. Has WestJet estimated the costs associated with the impacts of the new regulations?

Lyne Chayer: I'll let my colleague answer that question.

Tristan Joannette (Legal Counsel, WestJet Airlines Ltd.): The short answer is no. Without going into details about how we operate at WestJet, the different departments have different budgets. Various departments already have regulatory compliance budgets. Some will need to revise their budgets in light of the new regulatory obligations. We have an Excel spreadsheet with everything that needs to be done to comply with the new regulations, but we haven't put figures on the items yet.

Joël Godin: I'll ask you one last question because time is running out.

You're in a very competitive market and you don't have the same status as Air Canada in terms of obligations. You have obligations, but Air Canada has more. Is not being fully subject to the Official Languages Act a competitive advantage for you?

Tristan Joannette: To answer that, I'll simply say that Parliament made the decision to treat the two carriers differently.

Joël Godin: Is it an advantage for you?

Tristan Joannette: Obviously, Air Canada's background is very different from WestJet's. The advantage for us is to offer the service in French. Any service we offer in French is an advantage. At WestJet, we see it as an investment, something important that allows us to reach the francophone market.

Joël Godin: You see it as a way to attract French-speaking guests.

Tristan Joannette: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I now give the floor to Mr. El-Khoury for six minutes.

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

Welcome to the witnesses.

Ms. Chayer, in your opening remarks, you said that we need to continue promoting both languages here. Can you give us an example of what you're doing within your company to promote both languages?

Let's say one of your employees would like to learn French or another would like to improve their French. Could you offer these individuals French lessons? If not, would you promise to work toward offering these services?

Lyne Chayer: A process to advance French is under way within the company. The examples I gave are things we've been implementing since May of last year. We still have several steps to go through.

We're working in two phases. The first phase involved everything external, everything guest-related, meaning in flight, at airports, on the website and so forth. It was completed as a priority. We then did some internal work. Internally, we are ensuring that we have a francization committee. We've spoken with our various union partners. Among other things, we're in the process of applying to the Office québécois de la langue française for WestJet, in Quebec.

In response to your question, we're currently looking at training. We're definitely trying to hire bilingual staff, but we do know that unilingual anglophones at head office are interested in learning French. We're currently having that discussion internally with our human resources department.

Fayçal El-Khoury: I hope your discussion will lead to a francization service and access to English skills training for people who want to improve.

Mr. Joannette, let's talk about established rights. Let's consider a flight going from Vancouver or Calgary to Ottawa. Who do these rights apply to? Do they apply to flight attendants, passengers or both? I'd like you to explain it to me.

Tristan Joannette: Currently, under the Official Languages Act, airport passenger services must be offered in both English and French. This obligation applies to airport authorities, but the airport authorities impose the obligation on air carriers.

In the example you gave, if someone arrives at the counter in Vancouver, they have the right to be served in French. As for a Vancouver-Calgary flight, there would be no service in French because the cities are not designated areas. However, for the second leg of the flight, from Calgary to Ottawa, inflight service would be available in French, because Ottawa is in a designated area. Departing from Vancouver, service at the airport would be in French. At the Calgary airport, service would be in French. Upon arrival in Ottawa, service would be in French. In flight, service would be available in French between Calgary and Ottawa.

• (1650)

Fayçal El-Khoury: I'd like to have a bit more detail about when it starts and when it ends, for example, for other flights in Canada.

Tristan Joannette: Under the regulations we're looking at today, all flights departing from and arriving in Quebec will be subject to obligations. If you're on a flight departing from or arriving in Quebec, you will be served in French on board the flight.

As for the other regions, in the case of our flights to Sudbury, North Bay, Fredericton and Moncton, those destinations are in designated areas. Services will therefore be offered in French on all flights from Calgary to those four cities. Obviously, they will be offered on all flights to Quebec.

Lyne Chayer: I'd like to add something, if I may.

Even if inflight service isn't offered in French, our pre-recorded messages are always bilingual, in English and French, for our French-speaking guests. Everything related to safety and inflight service announcements is always bilingual on all of our flights.

Fayçal El-Khoury: Ms. Chayer, what do you think of the new regime that the Government of Canada is proposing to impose on federally regulated private businesses?

Lyne Chayer: Do you mean the regulations we're discussing today?

Fayçal El-Khoury: Yes.

Lyne Chayer: As I said in my opening remarks, we welcome the regulations and strongly support them.

We're just asking for some flexibility to be built in so that we can implement them. We've already been preparing for this for several months, knowing that they will come into effect in Quebec much sooner than outside Quebec. We'll have two years for the other designated areas.

That said, it takes a lot of preparation for a business to comply with the regulations, especially in the airline industry, where things change rapidly and we're subject to many federal requirements, such as Transport Canada's. We certainly appreciate having the opportunity to discuss this with you today; we'd just like to have the time to implement the various obligations in our company.

The Chair: Mr. El-Khoury, your time is up. Thank you very much.

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

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Chayer, I was looking at the press review. In 2024, not so long ago, Richard Martineau said that he wasn't able to obtain service in French from WestJet. Your response was that you weren't required to provide bilingual services.

Do you feel that there's been significant improvement since 2024? What have you done to change the situation?

Lyne Chayer: I don't quite remember what happened with Mr. Martineau, to be honest. Actually, it depends on whether he flew with Sunwing or WestJet.

That said, from 2024 to now, I'd say that a lot has changed. As I mentioned earlier, WestJet was obviously based more in western Canada at the time, so most flight attendants were from Calgary. Since then, we've acquired Sunwing, which has given us access to bilingual employees in Quebec, who will be able to serve passen-

gers in French on board our flights. WestJet now has a pool of flight attendants that it didn't have in 2024.

Mario Beaulieu: That's good.

Mr. Martineau flew with WestJet, and the flight attendant told him that English was the only official language in Canada. In any case, I was reading the article about it.

I wanted to know something else. Outside Quebec, do you have unilingual anglophone employees?

• (1655)

Lyne Chayer: Yes. We still have unilingual anglophone employees at headquarters in Calgary, among other places.

Mario Beaulieu: You said that you didn't have any unilingual francophone employees in Quebec. Isn't that discrimination?

Lyne Chayer: No. In Quebec, we automatically hire bilingual people because we obviously have to provide inflight service in both languages. Of course, flight attendants based at our hubs may be assigned to domestic flights, but we always want to provide service in both languages.

As for Sunwing Vacations, that was part of the acquisition. We have an office in Laval with 200 employees. Again, we hire bilingual staff. If customers want to contact the call centre, if they want to do a group booking, speak with customer service, whatever, we have to provide services in both languages.

Mario Beaulieu: However, if there are unilingual anglophone employees, why wouldn't there be unilingual francophone employees as well? It can be done. If one employee can't provide the service, another can. It seems a bit uneven. You're asking that all the Quebec employees be bilingual, but you should require that of all employees, period. That's my opinion.

Tristan Joannette: I'll answer that, if I may.

That is something the francization committee will take a very serious look at. We're aware that before we implement measures requiring English in Quebec, we need to make sure that the requirement is really necessary for the hiring process. There are a number of measures under the Charter of the French Language that need to be examined before we can impose a requirement other than French. Those are measures that we'll put in place, and we'll be sure to comply with them.

Mario Beaulieu: Are you subject to the Charter of the French Language?

Tristan Joannette: We have the obligation.

Mario Beaulieu: I'm not talking about the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act.

Tristan Joannette: No, I know. You're talking about the Charter of the French Language. We'll be registering soon. A company that hires a certain number of employees over a six-month period is required to register six months after the end of that period. We therefore have six months to register. In short, it takes a year, which expires at the end of the month. We'll therefore be registering very soon with the Office québécois de la langue française.

Mario Beaulieu: That's good. I commend you.

In any case, even with the French in federally regulated private businesses act, there is supposed to be widespread use of French for Quebec or, potentially, for regions with a high proportion of French speakers.

Lyne Chayer: Allow me to add that Sunwing Vacations was already certified by the Office québécois de la langue française. We had already done that. We're now preparing to do the same for WestJet.

Mario Beaulieu: That's great.

I was wondering whether people on your board of directors speak French. Does the chair of your board speak French?

Tristan Joannette: We have two people on the board of directors who can speak French. Our chair and our chief executive officer both speak French.

Mario Beaulieu: You're doing better than Air Canada.

Tristan Joannette: They're from Europe, so they're very familiar with multilingualism and the importance of languages.

Mario Beaulieu: That's good.

If you're already subject to the Charter of the French Language, you don't need to be subject to the federal law, except outside Quebec, is that right?

Tristan Joannette: For Quebec, the regime is optional. We can choose one regime or the other. Outside Quebec, the federal regulations apply.

Mario Beaulieu: Have you compared the two systems? What's your impression of each one?

Tristan Joannette: I'll answer very quickly. They're not identical, but they're very similar.

I believe the people from the department came to talk to you about their meetings with the Office québécois de la langue française, the OQLF, to ensure that the two regimes are as similar as possible.

The question for us is this: Will we work with two regulatory authorities, the commissioner federally and the OQLF provincially, or will we switch completely to the federal system to deal with a single regulatory authority? There's not really a significant difference between the two regimes.

Mario Beaulieu: You haven't decided yet. Is that correct?

Tristan Joannette: Essentially, we will likely follow the federal recommendation for practical reasons. If we are already subject to the regime that applies outside Quebec, it will be easier for us to coordinate with the federal government. However, ultimately, the obligations are the same for Quebec.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, your speaking time has expired. Thank you very much.

We will now move on to the next round of questions.

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

• (1700)

Marc Dalton: Thank you.

I would like to thank the witnesses.

Ms. Chayer, your company's presentation was very positive. That's nice, but I haven't heard any complaints. Normally, when business representatives come to meet with us, they have suggestions to make.

Are you completely satisfied with the draft regulations, and are you giving us carte blanche? If you have any suggestions, now is the time to make them, because we will be making recommendations after our study is complete.

Do you have any recommendations to make, or are you applauding what we've done?

Lyne Chayer: We have made some recommendations.

Marc Dalton: I didn't hear them.

Lyne Chayer: I think my colleague might like to make a few small recommendations.

Tristan Joannette: Of course, there are always things that can be improved in regulations.

Let me give you the example of the use of a very technical term, the "adhesion contract." When an employment contract is considered an adhesion contract, the contract must be provided to the employee in French. The term "adhesion contract" is a concept used in civil law, which is defined in the Civil Code of Quebec. It does not exist in common law. So, when the regulation begins to apply in the provinces and territories where common law applies, people will wonder exactly what an adhesion contract is. It might therefore be necessary to propose a definition in the regulation, or to adopt the one from the Civil Code. In any case, for the provinces where common law applies, that would be practical.

Let me give you another example. When establishing a committee to promote the French language, half of the representatives must be selected by management and the other half by the employees—that is, by the unions. Quebec's Charter of the French Language is very clear on how to do this when there are multiple unions. The regulation, however, provides no details.

I'm not saying this is wrong or bad, but it's unclear. We don't know what to do. The ministry could issue guidelines later, or changes could be made directly to the regulation. In Quebec, this was done directly in the language of the law rather than through guidelines. The unions meet and select the committee representatives. They do not necessarily work with one another. It is therefore easier for each union to choose its own representatives, and that would be our recommendation.

There are several recommendations, and I am sure we will have the opportunity to submit them in writing during the more formal process of the Canada Gazette. We would be happy to—

Marc Dalton: Making recommendations is also part of the process we are currently engaged in. So, if you have any to make, please send them to us in writing.

We're also talking about other very specific locations in the west where there is a strong francophone presence. I'm thinking of the Bonnie Doon area, which is part of Edmonton, and Beausejour, I believe. So, these are larger centres, like Edmonton in Alberta, or in Manitoba. So, it could be much more than what you have now.

Are you ready to hire? Is hiring people a big challenge? Do you currently have the number of fluent French speakers that you need? Tell us a little about recruitment.

I used to be a high school teacher. Do you have booths in French-language schools or immersion schools to encourage twelfth-grade students to consider working for you? Is that something you do?

Lyne Chayer: Thank you for the question. I'll try to be brief.

Currently, there are not enough bilingual flight attendants to provide service in French at all airports. So, over the next two years, we will certainly have to recruit flight attendants or provide training so that employees become bilingual, as we discussed earlier.

It is certainly a challenge. I think all the companies that will come to meet with you will tell you the same thing. Securing a qualified bilingual workforce will be our biggest challenge over the next two years. We will certainly have to be creative—we always are. So, we will find solutions, whether that means setting up kiosks, as you suggested, providing in-house training, or partnering with schools. There are organizations, too, that can help us. In Quebec, at least, there are several that can assist by providing grants or offering courses to our employees.

So, we will certainly explore all the solutions available to us so that we can offer service in French in two years. However, the biggest challenge is the workforce. In fact, that is why, in my introduction, I spoke, among other things, about French language training across the country. We are well aware that building schools or offering courses will not happen overnight. However, one of our recommendations is to explore how the federal government or the provinces can help improve French language courses in different regions of the country so that we can have people who speak French upon completing their studies.

• (1705)

The Chair: Ms. Chayer, your time is up. Thank you.

I now give the floor to Ms. Chenette for five minutes.

Madeleine Chenette (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Ms. Chayer, Mr. Joannette, thank you for being with us today. First of all, I would like to congratulate you, because as we listen to you, we can see your commitment to providing these services and this support to francophone employees. That is music to our ears.

I would like to follow up on a few questions that were asked. We have just discussed the issue of the Charter of the French Language and the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act.

Mr. Joannette, you said that working under a single regulatory framework would simplify things for you. You are used to dealing

with a lot of regulations in the aviation sector. Can you tell us specifically what the additional burden would be of operating under two regulatory frameworks?

Tristan Joannette: I would say that, in this case, the substantive obligations are quite similar. It is more of a procedural issue. When we work with two regulatory bodies, there must be two different channels of communication. We may also have to deal with recommendations that could differ from one authority to another and that could conflict, which could create confusion.

So, for us, working with a single regulatory authority—in this case, the commissioner or the department—would simplify the procedural process. For example, rather than registering with two different channels, we register with just one. So, it's not so much a matter of substance. It's really more a matter of procedure. It simplifies the work. There's less bureaucracy and half the registration paperwork.

Madeleine Chenette: However, this is not a major issue. You are already working with the Office québécois de la langue française. So, choosing the framework of the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act is not a major change. There are harder things, such as recruiting good bilingual employees in Canada. I imagine the two challenges are not comparable.

Tristan Joannette: No, not at all.

Madeleine Chenette: Experts have suggested that we expand the territory, as Mr. Dalton mentioned earlier. You spoke of provincial capitals as well as major cities like Toronto or Halifax. So, given your desire to make your services available in French and to offer bilingual service, is expanding the territory really a problem?

Tristan Joannette: I will answer that question.

The government has decided to implement certain measures. This is the first step in the process.

Let's take the example of the Official Languages Act. The territories mentioned at the beginning of the act are not the same as they are today. Things have changed over the years. What will happen, outside of Quebec, when the regulation comes into effect, is that businesses will face major challenges regarding their workforce. They will have to ensure they have the necessary workforce to provide services.

If we include the capital cities—I'll use Edmonton as an example—based on how the regulation is worded, all flights departing from or arriving in Edmonton would now be required to offer service in French. The same would apply to Victoria, British Columbia, for example. This would therefore be a major step forward. Obviously, in an ideal world, WestJet would absolutely love to offer service in French on every flight, but to achieve that, it requires staff.

We are truly proud of what the federal government has done in education. Significant funds have been invested in education outside Quebec; for example, there have been agreements with Alberta regarding French-language schools. That is very important, and it must continue. We urge the government to do more, because this will help prepare the workforce of tomorrow, which will give us the opportunity to expand these areas and territories. However, for now, the balance the department has established is realistic, in our view.

• (1710)

Madeleine Chenette: Since I only have 40 seconds left, I'll ask you a quick question.

Right now, both official languages are very important for attracting labour and investment, whether in the east, the west, or the north. We feel that Canada is really going to strengthen the use of both official languages, which should help you have a francophone presence throughout Canada.

How do you plan to use new technologies for learning? Have you given this any thought? Physical presence and human interaction are important, but learning involves more than that. Have you evaluated all the interesting options that could inspire us?

Lyne Chayer: Looking at the tools we'll be using is part of our internal process; this is phase 2. Several technologies are now available, whether it's artificial intelligence or all sorts of other technologies. We're looking at the full range of technologies. We need to set priorities based on our financial and human resources, and see what we're able to implement. Indeed, these are avenues we are currently exploring, and we will continue to do so in the future.

Currently, our priority is to ensure that all our guests are served in both official languages and that our French is impeccable everywhere. Now, we still need to develop certain things internally.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chenette.

Mr. Beaulieu, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mario Beaulieu: Ms. Chayer, you said that you are subject to the Charter of the French Language, but that you plan to opt out of the application of the Charter of the French Language in favour of federal law. Have I understood you correctly?

Lyne Chayer: As for the airline, yes. We need to be careful, because we have two companies. There is Sunwing Vacations, which is a tour operator. It is a tour operator that, as I mentioned, has its offices in Laval and employs 200 people.

We will always be governed by the Office québécois de la langue française. Every year, we make sure to submit all our information, such as the outdoor signage that was revised last June and the triennial report, among other things. That will remain the same. However, in the case of WestJet—

Mario Beaulieu: Is that part established in Quebec?

Lyne Chayer: Yes, that's correct.

Mario Beaulieu: So this is not really a business under federal jurisdiction.

Lyne Chayer: No, that's correct. That's why WestJet Airlines, for its part, will be subject to federal law. Obviously, it's the airline that is national.

Mario Beaulieu: Essentially, the Quebec government gambled that by securing certain concessions to strengthen federal law, businesses would remain subject to the Charter of the French Language. However, you are proof that this is not true. There are surely many businesses like yours that will tell themselves they do business outside Quebec and that it will be easier to opt out of the French Language Charter and fall under federal law.

Tristan Joanette: I would like to clarify something. When we talk about exempting ourselves from the Quebec Charter of the French Language, that is not entirely accurate, since federal obligations are virtually identical to those of the Quebec Charter of the French Language. What changes is the authority that regulates us. It will be the federal Commissioner of Official Languages and the Department of Canadian Heritage rather than the Office québécois de la langue française. However, the obligations are the same as those under the Quebec Charter of the French Language.

Mario Beaulieu: They are not quite the same, because there are no financial penalties at the federal level. There are still considerable differences between the two.

At the very least, why wouldn't the banks do the same thing? Bank representatives told us they were subject to Bill 101 and that it would stay that way. However, banks also do business outside Quebec. So why wouldn't they use the same reasoning as you?

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, your speaking time is up. I can accept a one-sentence response, but that is all.

Tristan Joanette: You'd have to ask the bankers.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

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

Jim Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to see that you are making efforts regarding language. How does WestJet ensure compliance with official language obligations in its customer service? I see that you are making significant efforts in the province of Quebec under your language policy, but I would like to compare that to what you are doing outside of Quebec.

• (1715)

Tristan Joanette: I was born a Franco-Ontarian and am now a Franco-Albertan by adoption. Issues concerning the francophone community outside Quebec are obviously very important to me. This new law and its regulations will impose new obligations on us outside Quebec. The law will now apply to certain flights. I gave some examples of this earlier. We will be subject to the obligation to provide services in French and English.

Now, all of this represents obligations. However, WestJet likes to go above and beyond its obligations. We already offer service in French on many of our flights. We didn't wait for the obligations to take effect to do so, because for us, it's an added value. We want to serve our French-speaking customers in French. It's important and it's fundamental. At WestJet, we understand the importance of this all the way up to the highest levels.

Lyne Chayer: We've talked a lot about Quebec, because that's where the largest French-speaking population is. So, it's certainly been our priority, and we want to ensure we serve our customers well. However, French-speaking customers outside Quebec can already benefit from all the efforts we've made over the course of the year, whether it's inflight announcements, pre-recorded messages, messages delivered by our flight attendants, or content on the website or mobile app.

So, the only small missing piece of the puzzle is bilingual inflight service across all the regions that have now been defined.

Jim Bélanger: I'm from northern Ontario, in the Sudbury area. We have Sudbury Airport there. For us, the competition for longer-haul flights is between Air Canada and WestJet. Are French-language services the same? If not, what challenges do you face in making French-language services in Sudbury comparable to those in Quebec? Sudbury is, after all, a region with a fairly significant francophone presence.

Lyne Chayer: Indeed.

That will in fact be part of the new regulatory requirements. We now have two years to comply in order to offer French-language service on flights departing from or arriving at Sudbury Airport. It is clear that, at this time, this service is not currently available. The flight crew assigned to these flights is based in Toronto and is not predominantly bilingual at this time. This will be one of our challenges. As we mentioned earlier, the biggest challenge with this regulation, for all companies—at least for WestJet—will be recruiting bilingual employees and providing French-language training within the company.

Jim Bélanger: Okay.

How do you respond to the complaints you receive? Do you get many regarding French? It's only in Quebec right now, isn't it?

Lyne Chayer: We do have bilingual flight attendants outside of Quebec. I'm always talking about the Montreal base, which is the largest base. However, in Calgary and Toronto, we also have flight attendants who are bilingual. So, we're able to offer bilingual service when there are flight crew members who can do so.

As for complaints, we don't get a huge number of them. I don't have any figures to share with you today, but we haven't received many complaints regarding the fact that our services aren't offered in French. It can happen. We won't deny that it can happen on a flight where there's been a change of aircraft, where a crew from a different base has come to work, or where a flight attendant is sick that day. Whatever the reason, there are sometimes difficulties. So, it can happen that we are unable to provide service in French, but this is very rare, and there are very few complaints as well.

At WestJet, after every flight, we send a survey to our passengers. This survey allows us to measure passenger satisfaction. We

then analyze the results by looking at the most critical issues and the positive aspects, and we take action to find solutions when certain issues come up in the survey. However, the number of complaints about service in French is really minimal.

The Chair: Your time is up.

Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

We now go to Mr. Deschênes-Thériault for five minutes.

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

Ms. Chayer, I gather that you welcome the new use of French obligations you will be subject to under the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act. I also gather you see the two-year time frame for businesses to comply as reasonable, given your readiness. Is that correct?

● (1720)

Lyne Chayer: Yes. We definitely welcome the regulations. As my colleague said, for us, it's not an obligation per se, because it's really a process that was under way. We want to provide bilingual service because we know there are francophone communities all over Canada. It gives us an advantage as well.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: To your mind, is the two-year time frame reasonable?

Lyne Chayer: The two-year time frame is reasonable, but it's going to fly by. As with anything on the horizon, when you have x amount of time, you always think there's still time, but it goes by faster than you think. It will be necessary to adapt and put measures in place fairly quickly, because staff need to be hired and training programs need to be established. It takes quite a while just to recruit, hire, train and certify flight attendants. There's a process in place.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about your readiness. You said you had a base in Calgary, which isn't a designated region under the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act, and a base in Montreal, which is of course a designated region, meaning a region with a strong francophone presence. That means the right to be supervised in French won't necessarily apply to WestJet employees in Calgary but will apply to those in Montreal.

How will that play out, and how are you getting ready?

Lyne Chayer: The base is operational already. For example, for flight attendants, we have three francophones at the base here. They also speak English, and they supervise all our flight attendants here. That option is already available to our staff. Our staff in Quebec are supervised by someone who speaks English or French. It's important to note that the employee decides which language they want to communicate in. All that to say we really have French-speaking staff supervising our teams.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: The Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act brings something new: the rights will apply at the door. For instance, in the case of a flight from Calgary to Ottawa, obligations will apply because Ottawa is a region with a strong francophone presence. As soon as passengers enter the airport in Calgary, they will have the right to be served in French, since their destination is a region with a strong francophone presence.

In that respect, how ready are you to satisfy the obligations in the act?

Lyne Chayer: I'm going to let my colleague answer that. He takes that flight every week. He can talk about it.

Tristan Joannette: I'm very familiar with the Calgary-Ottawa flight.

Basically, the obligation to provide service in French at the airport already exists under the Official Languages Act. When the passenger arrives at the check-in counter, they have the right to be served in French. Airport announcements also have to be made in French.

What's new under the act and regulations is the service aboard the aircraft. The safety briefing is already given in French. That obligation already exists. What's more, all on-board announcements are already delivered in both languages. The service on board the aircraft is what's changing. Passengers will have the right to be served in French on that flight, for instance, when ordering food or beverages. That means we'll need crew members able to serve people in French. For us, that means making sure we have enough staff in Calgary to cover those flights and provide service in French.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: You said the federal and provincial governments have a role to play in French language learning to, of course, advance bilingualism in Canadian society. As a federally regulated business, you have the specific obligation of making sure that you have the necessary staff. Part of that is recruiting new employees, but the other part is ensuring that your current personnel meet the requirement.

Given your new obligations, I'd like to hear a bit more about your plans for language training in house. As you pointed out, the two years are going to fly by.

Lyne Chayer: Yes, the two years are going to fly by.

As I said, it's part of phase 2, which just started. Phase 2 involves the training plan. The question is how are we going to make sure

we provide that training, knowing we have staff all over the country. It will probably be online training, but we haven't made any progress in that area yet. I can't tell you now what exactly our training program will look like.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I have 30 seconds.

As I understand it, you've made some technical recommendations, regarding the contracts of adhesion and union obligations. I didn't hear you propose any substantial amendments to the meat of the draft regulations.

Do you recommend that the draft regulations be adopted as they are?

Tristan Joannette: We don't recommend that the draft regulations be adopted in their current form.

Obviously, there are always things we would like to see improved or clarified. As for the content or substance of the regulations, the obligations are very similar to those in Quebec's Charter of the French Language. The charter has basically been a guide for WestJet's efforts and activities this past year. The fact that they were similar in substance made our job easier, so we don't have any recommendations regarding the substance of the draft regulations.

Our recommendations have more to do with the procedure, in terms of defining or clarifying certain terms. Those are things we'd like to see.

• (1725)

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

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

Ms. Chayer and Mr. Joannette, on behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you for being with us today. As you know, when we hear from witnesses, it is up to the members from all the parties to consider what the witnesses have told us and reflect those comments in the committee's work and reports.

However, as chair of the committee, I want to thank you for being ready to appear, for replying to the committee's invitation so quickly, for providing straight answers to members' questions and for being so professional today. That is what I would expect of airline representatives appearing before the Standing Committee on Official Languages. On behalf of the committee and my colleagues, I would like to thank you.

Honourable members, before I let you go, we have some quick housekeeping to discuss.

The clerk sent out the additional budget for meals during the study on the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act. Has everyone seen it? Are we ready to approve it?

Seeing that you all agree, I declare the budget carried.

Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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