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Standing Committee on Official Languages

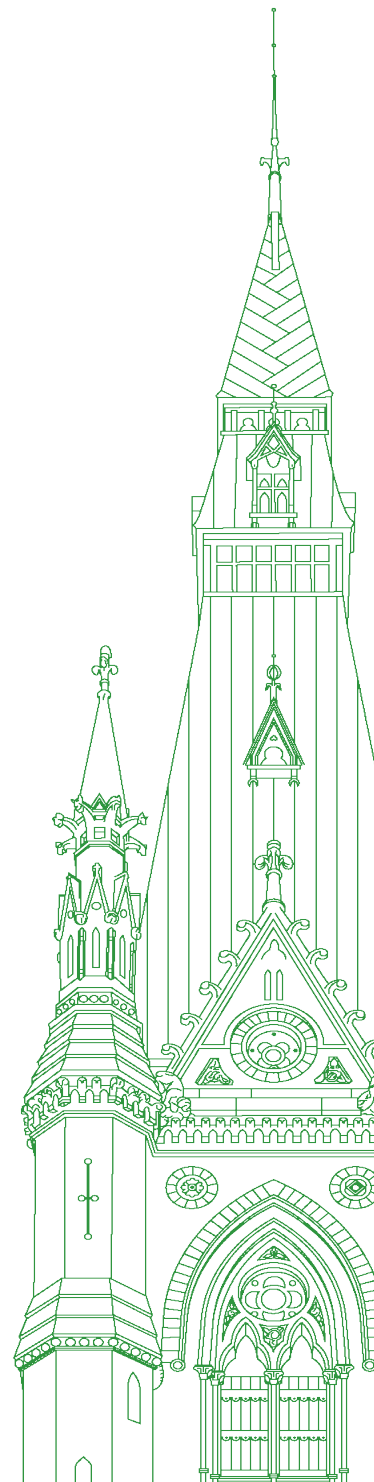
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Chair: Yvan Baker



Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1630)

[Translation]

The Chair (Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Dear colleagues, welcome to meeting number 42 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 use of French in Air Canada communications.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Pursuant to the Standing Orders, members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Before I continue, I need to read a few words. I have to share them with you and remind you of a few things. I would like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. You'll also notice a QR code on the card, which links to a short awareness video.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for witnesses and members.

First, before speaking, wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. When you are not speaking, your mic should be on mute.

Second, for interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

Third, I would like to remind the witnesses that committee members can ask their questions in French or English. If you need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select in advance the appropriate channel so that we can maximize the time for questions and answers. A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function.

The committee clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can, and we appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

From Air Canada, we have Vagn Sorensen, chair of the board of directors, who is appearing by video conference; Marc Barbeau, executive vice-president, chief legal officer and corporate secretary; and David Rheault, vice-president, government and community relations.

Mr. Sorensen, you have five minutes for your opening remarks. We will then proceed to a question and answer period with committee members. The floor is yours.

Vagn Sorensen (Chair of the Board of Directors, Air Canada): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the official languages priorities of the Air Canada board of directors.

[English]

Before I begin, I'd like to share that neither English nor French is my first language, but I'll do my best to address the committee in both languages.

[Translation]

I would like to take a moment here to reiterate our sincere condolences to the families and loved ones of the Jazz captain and first officer who tragically lost their lives in the accident on March 22.

Turning to the subject of our appearance today, I want to assure you that our board recognizes the importance of official languages to Canadians and to our customers, employees and partners across the country.

• (1635)

[English]

As chair, my role is to lead the board's work as it oversees senior management and sets Air Canada's overall priorities.

[Translation]

The Official Languages Act has applied to Air Canada for over 50 years now and is part of our identity. We are the only airline that is subject to this act. We are proud of our responsibilities to the public. They make us a better company. We believe that all carriers should be held to the same standard.

Air Canada has a detailed linguistic action plan. Our official languages branch is responsible for implementing it, supported by a committee made up of members from several branches.

[English]

These initiatives include the recruitment of bilingual employees, language training, management awareness training, employee support tools, and internal and external communications, as well as the monitoring of progress and complaints. The destination is clear: to better serve customers in the official language of their choice and to support employees in using their preferred language at work.

We have also achieved significant progress. Since 2022, we have hired more than 5,000 bilingual employees to serve our customers. Today, nearly 50% of our customer-facing employees are qualified as bilingual, and nearly 65% have abilities in both official languages. We have made language awareness training mandatory for our employees, and 97% of customer-facing employees have completed it. As a result, the number of complaints related to our services has decreased materially. The commissioner received 85 complaints related to Air Canada in 2024-25, out of 1,200 total complaints for all federal institutions.

[Translation]

We take these complaints very seriously, and our team reviews each one so we can continue to improve.

The implementation of our linguistic action plan is overseen by senior leadership, and quarterly reports are submitted to the board's governance committee. These updates enable us to track our progress and ensure that official languages remain a priority.

Our leadership team reflects this priority. All members of Air Canada's executive committee are fluent in French and English.

As a company, we also understand the importance of French and the connections it helps create. As Canada diversifies its markets, Air Canada is engaging with more francophone markets around the world. We connect Canada to five cities in France, Switzerland, Belgium and Morocco, and we want to open new routes, particularly to francophone Africa.

The board recently completed a rigorous internal and external process that led to the selection of our next president and CEO. We considered a number of criteria, including aviation experience and the ability to run a global company, to have a positive impact on corporate culture and to speak French. We are proud to have recruited Anko van der Werff, a highly qualified leader who will guide Air Canada to new heights and communicate in both official languages.

I will conclude by affirming our board's commitment to both official languages.

Thank you. I'm ready to answer your questions. However, I would note that I'm more comfortable answering in English.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sorensen.

We will now move on to questions from members.

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

• (1640)

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

Thank you, Mr. Sorensen. Thank you for your efforts to speak French. It's impressive, and it's much better than your former president and CEO. I also want to thank you on behalf of the families of the two pilots, an anglophone and a francophone, who recently lost their lives.

I'll start with several quick questions.

How long have you been chair of the board?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I've been the board chair since 2017, but I have served on the board since 2006.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Were you the one who hired the former CEO, Mr. Rousseau?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I hired the last two CEOs, yes.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: I have a personal question. Where do you live?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I live in Denmark, in Europe.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: How many times a year do you come to Montreal, which is where Air Canada's head office is located?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Very often, I would say. I'm probably in Canada six or seven times per year. Most of the time, it is Montreal that is my destination, because that's where we have our head office and where we have most of our board meetings.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: You said in your presentation that all board members speak French. Did I understand correctly?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: No. The translation there was not correct. I said that the entire executive committee speaks French fluently or speaks both languages fluently. In terms of the board, more than half of the members have some level of proficiency in French. Three are native French speakers.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: You said "some members", but can you tell us how many board members speak French?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: There are seven who speak French to some level of proficiency. Three of them are native French speakers and are from Quebec, as a matter of fact. I think we have, all in all, 13 members on the board, so more than half speak French to some degree.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Even so, you never hold your board meetings in French, do you?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We hold our board meetings in English, which everybody speaks and understands, but we have translation available. Any member can ask to address the board or make a presentation in French or ask for material to be translated into French.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: This question may be a little biased: You know that you use our country's name in your company's trademark, right?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Absolutely.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: You said that all airlines should have the same obligations. Are you aware that Air Canada has special status in Canada because of its official language obligations?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Absolutely, I know that. We are, obviously, subject to the Official Languages Act. That's a thing we're very committed to and we're very proud of. It's part of who we are. It's part of our culture. Bilingualism is very important for us, and it's something we promote on an everyday basis.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: How did you react when, at a chamber of commerce event in Montreal, you heard your president and CEO say that he didn't need to speak French, despite Air Canada's obligation to communicate in both official languages on an equal basis? How did you react, and what actions did you take after that?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I was very disappointed. I felt that he shouldn't have made those remarks, to which there was understandably a very negative reaction. I was disappointed, and so was the whole board. It led to a very rapid summons of the directors for a meeting.

• (1645)

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Sorensen.

You were disappointed. I can understand that; we were very disappointed as well. Now, what have you, as chair of the board, done to remedy the situation?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Obviously, we had a serious meeting with Mr. Rousseau, who at that meeting committed to improve his French and committed to undertake very intensive French training, which

he did, but as we know today, unfortunately it did not lead to the desired result. I'm very happy to say that the next CEO of Air Canada will communicate in French.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Does the new CEO live in Canada?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: He will live in Canada. Yes, he will, and he'll report to our head office in Montreal, along with 2,500 other employees. He'll be based there.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: I have more questions about your CEO, Mr. Rousseau. Why did he not step down until the committee and other stakeholders who are concerned about Canada's francophonie applied pressure? You didn't make the decision; Mr. Rousseau chose to retire. Why didn't it come from Air Canada's leadership?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Sorensen, I would ask for a very brief response. The time has well elapsed now.

Vagn Sorensen: You're referring to the video after the tragic accident, I assume. Is that correct?

[Translation]

Joël Godin: No, I'm not talking about the video.

Excuse me, Mr. Chair. May I finish my remarks? Mr. Sorensen didn't understand the question.

The Chair: Be quick.

Joël Godin: Mr. Sorensen, here's my question: Given the pressure that was brought to bear, why did the board of directors not respond to these situations by dismissing Mr. Rousseau rather than waiting for him to step down on his own?

[English]

The Chair: Give a quick response, please, Mr. Sorensen.

Vagn Sorensen: We were in the midst of the pandemic and in a pretty problematic situation at that point. Mr. Rousseau was a good CEO in terms of steering the company out of that crisis. He committed—and we, in good faith, believed him—to improving his French.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

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

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

Mr. Sorensen, the committee's mandate is to ensure that both official languages are respected in the context of the modernized Official Languages Act. An additional layer is added to this mandate: achieving substantive equality between the two official languages, particularly by protecting and promoting French. I just wanted to remind you of that from the outset.

Thank you for being with us. Thank you for delivering your opening remarks in both official languages.

We remember the controversy that arose following the release of a video—which had been pre-recorded as well—of condolences offered essentially in English by the president and CEO of Air Canada.

Air Canada already had a policy stipulating that its public communications must be in both official languages. That was already in place. How do you explain, then, that such a situation could have occurred at the highest level of the company? Has the board assessed why the existing mechanisms failed?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Given the urgency and given the sensitivity of the situation, Mr. Rousseau decided to record it in English with French subtitles. That was received very negatively. Obviously, we are very sorry for that decision on behalf of Mr. Rousseau, for which he has apologized, but it was the decision he made.

[Translation]

Louis Villeneuve: I can no longer hear the interpretation.

The Chair: We'll suspend for a minute while we get the technical glitch sorted out.

• (1645)

(Pause)

• (1650)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Mr. Villeneuve, I had stopped the clock. The floor is yours.

Louis Villeneuve: Okay.

Mr. Sorensen, I would like you to repeat the last part of your answer, please.

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Given the urgency, Mr. Rousseau chose to make his statement on the video in English with French subtitles. That was an error in judgment, but he did it, I believe, in good faith. He wanted to come across as authentically as possible, given the sensitivity of the situation and the personal nature of the message.

[Translation]

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you.

That was six months ago. Can you tell me what has changed in concrete terms? What mechanism have you put in place at the executive level of the board of directors to ensure that, even in an emergency situation, this type of thing won't ever happen again?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We have an emergency procedure, a standard operating procedure, that calls for, obviously, communication in

both official languages, which, apart from the video recorded by Mr. Rousseau, also worked as it should have. That included the special response team sent to the accident site in New York. They spoke to relatives, spoke to families and spoke to the people involved. They were able to do that in both official languages.

I believe the emergency procedure we have in place worked, apart from the video, which shouldn't have been unilingual in English with French subtitles.

[Translation]

Louis Villeneuve: Okay. Thank you.

Who's responsible for ensuring that Air Canada complies with the protocol?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Basically, it's management. I believe that within management, it's the CEO, but obviously there's a head of communications who should oversee that it is followed.

[Translation]

Louis Villeneuve: Okay. Thank you.

Excuse me, Mr. Chair, but there's a delay. It looks like the volume is going down in French at the end of the answers.

Mr. Sorensen, you have already announced that the next president and CEO of Air Canada should or could speak both of the country's official languages. What importance did the board attach to the ability to communicate in French—a real ability to do so—in choosing the next president and CEO?

How will that competency be assessed and maintained once the leader is in place?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We assigned great importance to that. When we did this succession process and search, both internally and externally, that was one of the criteria we applied, alongside of a lot of other criteria. In terms of the external candidates, these were criteria such as, obviously, CEO experience and the ability to lead a major global corporation, create followership and positively impact culture, and so on and so forth. However, the ability to communicate in both official languages was given great importance.

As I said before, we have found our next CEO in Mr. van der Werff, who is able to communicate in both official languages.

[Translation]

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

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you, Mr. Sorensen.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

Before giving the floor to Mr. Beaulieu, I would like to raise two administrative points.

First, when there are interpretation problems, I give members a little more time. I did it for Mr. Godin, and I did it for Mr. Villeneuve as well.

Second, I'd like to talk about the problem you had with interpretation, Mr. Villeneuve. The clerk said that it might be happening when the witness's microphone and the member's microphone are on at the same time. It would be good to keep the microphones off as much as possible.

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

• (1655)

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

Mr. Sorensen, I'd like to talk about everything that happened with your previous president and CEO and all the controversy. First, there is the fact that he said he'd never had to speak French in Montreal since he'd been there, and that it was a very good thing.

Don't you feel that sends a signal? Isn't there an underlying mentality that is resistant to French?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Mr. Rousseau was not our previous chair, but our previous CEO. He was hired during the pandemic, at a time when there was severe financial pressure on Air Canada and severe pressure on our liquidity. Weighing up all of the different criteria in choosing a CEO, we found that Mr. Rousseau was the best choice at that given time because we needed somebody who could steer us out of a very precarious situation and recover the company financially. That was the main reason for the choice of Mr. Rousseau, and he has delivered on that.

Obviously, after the incident at the Montreal chamber of commerce, we were all very disappointed, as I previously said. We got a commitment from Mr. Rousseau that he would improve his French by undertaking intensive French training, which he did and which was followed up on, but unfortunately it didn't lead to the desired result.

We also strengthened board oversight and established an official languages branch, which now has 28 employees. We made management awareness training mandatory, and we—

[Translation]

Mario Beaulieu: I don't have much time.

How do you explain that? He committed to learning French. He took many hours of French classes, according to you. However, when he appeared here, he wasn't even able to read a few sentences in French, like you did.

Subsequently, the accident in which the two pilots died happened. He decided to send a message in English only with two small words in French. Don't you think this sends out an image of intolerance or lack of respect for French on the part of Air Canada? [Technical difficulty—Editor] repeatedly.

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Yes, and that was obviously a big disappointment. It was also a big disappointment to Mr. Rousseau himself, for which he profoundly apologized.

It's not that he didn't undertake the lessons. I think the number of lessons he took was more than 300, in addition to 250 hours of preparing for those lessons, but it simply did not lead to the result desired. The only explanation I can give is that Mr. Rousseau simply wasn't capable of learning French. For some it's easier than for others.

[Translation]

Mario Beaulieu: We won't belabour the point. The goal is not to reprimand an individual; rather, this is about the company, the corporate culture.

You said earlier that you had 1,500 bilingual employees. Is that an improvement?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: No, we have much more than that. I said that 50% of all customer-facing employees are bilingual and 65% have the capacity to become bilingual, so it's much more. If I take the entire employee population of Air Canada, my estimate is that around 40% are bilingual, so it's much more than that.

• (1700)

[Translation]

Mario Beaulieu: In that case, why did you announce this summer that there would be fewer bilingual flight attendants and less French on international flights?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: That was a temporary thing over the summer, because we were simply not able to hire bilingual employees quickly enough. It has a lot to do with, as you know, our bilingual commitment to routes to, from and within Quebec. For instance, there are designated bilingual routes where we have a contingent of bilingual services on all flights. The company had expanded so much in Montreal that the need for bilingual employees was so big it temporarily couldn't be met, so we had to scale it down on some flights.

[Translation]

Mario Beaulieu: Has the situation been corrected? Have efforts been made to increase the number of employees who speak French? According to what the union president said, in some situations, there were safety risks. When people can't understand the flight attendant's instructions, there can be repercussions.

[English]

The Chair: I'd ask for a quick response, Mr. Sorensen. The time is up.

Vagn Sorensen: That, I would question. I don't think there were any...or there were no safety issues around that. We are hiring all the bilingual employees that we can get hold of. We've hired more than 5,000 since 2022.

To my knowledge, the situation has corrected in the meantime. It was a thing in the height of summer, which had to do with certain operational restrictions and also in terms of what aircraft we had delivery of and which ones were delayed.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

We will now begin the second round of questions. I give the floor to Mr. Gourde for five minutes.

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

It's good to see you, Mr. Sorensen, and to be able to speak with you. I'm happy to meet the chair of the board of directors of Air Canada. You admitted earlier that you were present, that you were chair when Michael Rousseau was hired. When you had to assess the applications, there must have been other potential candidates for the position of president and CEO of Air Canada.

Was bilingualism one of the hiring criteria at the time?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: It was one of the criteria, alongside many other criteria. As I said before, it was at the height of the pandemic, and there was severe financial pressure on the airline. We operated, in a month—I remember—less than 10% of the normal flights. There was also a risk to our viability in terms of liquidity and so on.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Mr. Sorensen. I have other questions.

Were there a number of other candidates? There may have been a number of criteria, but were there other potential candidates?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We obviously considered other candidates, but we found that given the situation, Mr. Rousseau was the best choice for Air Canada.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: I would like to come back to Air Canada's culture. You talked about identity, but in terms of culture, Air Canada would have to be able to prove it.

Let's talk about bilingualism training. There's an internal program at Air Canada that enables your employees who are not bilingual or who have trouble speaking French to learn French.

First of all, how many employees does Air Canada have in total?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We have around 39,000 employees in total.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Air Canada has 39,000 employees. Thank you very much.

Is it possible to know how many hours per year the French education program entails?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: That figure I wouldn't have, but I can refer the question to Mr. Rheault, who's in the room. He would have that figure.

• (1705)

[Translation]

David Rheault (Vice President, Government and Community Relations, Air Canada): Depending on the type of course, we're talking about 25,000 to 30,000 hours of classes per year.

Jacques Gourde: A total of 25,000 to 30,000 hours a year and a total of 39,000 employees equates to about 45 minutes of courses per year per employee. That may not be how the calculation is done, but that's the reality. You can elaborate on that.

David Rheault: In fact, the courses are given based on employee needs. About 700 employees take courses every year. We focus mainly on public-facing employees. Approximately 15,000 employees are in contact with the public, and approximately 50% of them already have bilingual qualifications.

The courses are given to other employees who have qualifications, who need to practice or who have to requalify every year. For example, some employees are somewhat proficient in French, but since they're in parts of the country where they don't have the opportunity to practice it often, they take courses to ensure that they maintain their level.

It's hard to find opportunities to practice when you're in western Canada.

Jacques Gourde: According to Air Canada, what is the acceptable minimum in terms of proficiency in both official languages, but especially French, for a public-facing employee?

Do they need to be able to say, "*Bonjour, comment ça va?*" Do they need a little more than that?

David Rheault: We have four levels of French proficiency. People are tested. A person who has reached level 4 is perfectly bilingual and doesn't need to requalify. A person who has reached level 3 is considered bilingual. The test for level 3 is to be able to translate an unscheduled announcement on one's own. So, if there is an announcement to be made on the plane, the person is able to translate it live without assistance. A person with a level 3 qualification is able to adapt quickly.

A person who has reached level 2 is able to communicate and provide a service, but is not considered bilingual. When we say that 50% of our employees are qualified as bilingual, that means employees with a qualification of level 3 or higher. So they can provide the service, including the unscheduled announcement. When we talk about 65% of employees, that includes employees with a level 2 qualification. They can provide a service, but they're not qualified.

When we assign bilingual staff, we only count employees who have a level 3 or higher qualification, because we feel that's an acceptable standard.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

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

Madeleine Chenette (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sorensen, it's a pleasure to welcome you to the committee and to be able to have a discussion in both languages. We really appreciate it.

You've been on the board of directors since 2006. Your new CEO will assume office in January.

If he asks you why both official languages are important in Canada, what will you tell him?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I would tell him that it's part of the culture and it's part of what Canada is, and I would obviously tell him, as we have done as a matter of fact, about the Official Languages Act, which we're very proud to be part of and subject to and committed to.

Mr. van der Werff will definitely pick up the baton and continue to work on our linguistic plan with the aim of further improving our position as to bilingual services, as I have already discussed with him.

[Translation]

Madeleine Chenette: Thank you, Mr. Sorensen.

We've asked a lot of questions about what happened in the past, but I'm interested in what will happen in the future. In your opinion, given the current geopolitical situation, the growth of the global francophone market—you talked about new markets you want to develop—and the dynamic in Canada with Prime Minister Carney and what we want to achieve, what more can Air Canada, which has the word “Canada” in its company name, do to strengthen our two official languages across the country?

• (1710)

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I think we can always do more, and we will do more. We should do more. We are also measuring how our customers relate to our efforts. We measure that by the number of complaints, and that's come down significantly.

I'd like to get to the first point of your question, which is around developing our route network and so on. The francophone part of the world plays a great role there. Also, as a matter of fact, if you look at how we've balanced our hops—Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver—Montreal is actually the hop that's had the biggest growth. I just looked it up. In 2019, we offered 99 destinations out of Montreal. Now, in September 2026, we offer 120, so there are 21% more destinations offered out of Montreal, and a lot of them are to francophone parts of the world. That is a tremendous piece of aviation infrastructure, which will benefit Canadians and Quebec inhabitants, but also Quebec businesses. I'm proud that we're able to offer such unparalleled aviation infrastructure out of Quebec.

[Translation]

Madeleine Chenette: Thank you.

I am indeed a proud Quebecker. However, as a Canadian, I know that we want to grow the francophonie across the country. What is your company's role in that? What will you and the board of directors tell your CEO so he understands that developing the francophonie in Canada is an asset for your company? What clear priority

will you set for the CEO to ensure that he develops the francophonie across the country?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We see it as a competitive advantage, and it is something we offer with great pride.

[Translation]

We know Canadians want to be served in the official language of their choice. We believe this is good for our business and that our customers appreciate it.

[English]

That's why we want to continue to do it: It will increase customer satisfaction, and with customer satisfaction comes more demand, which is obviously good for our company. We want Canadians to be proud of what we do, and this is part of it.

[Translation]

Madeleine Chenette: I have one last question. Air Canada is an international company. You yourself are Dane. Now, if we want to have a Canadian as CEO, is that something you would consider?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Absolutely. There were also several Canadians in the mix we looked at, and I can reveal that there were also people from Quebec. The choice fell to Mr. van der Werff because he best fit the profile, but it might very well be a Canadian the next time around. Who knows?

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chenette.

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

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Sorensen, you said that you were very disappointed with Mr. Rousseau's unilingual speech, but according to the media, he subsequently received considerable bonuses, which were \$2.6 million in 2023 and \$2.3 million in 2022. Are these normal bonuses? Also, was he reprimanded for that speech?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Mr. Rousseau was a good CEO. He's retired now, so I can use the past tense. He contributed to restoring the balance sheet of Air Canada, and he made a safe recovery for Air Canada after the pandemic.

We evaluated. A big part of his pay was a variable component. Different things went into that variable component, including his efforts to learn French. That was probably not the factor that gave him more, but there were other factors that gave him some. He's part of the same compensation concept as all others in management, for which a big part is variable and is dependent on the performance of the company and personal performance.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Mario Beaulieu: Do you think it's an important skill for a CEO to have to be able to communicate with a significant segment of their company's clientele?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: It is an important skill, and that's also why I'm happy that Mr. van der Werff will be able to communicate in French. He will be able to communicate in both official languages, which I consider important for creating followership.

[Translation]

Mario Beaulieu: I have just one last comment. It's been said that hired employees are learning French, but lose it because they don't use it. Do you think that if Air Canada's internal meetings were held in French and if there were more documentation and communications done in French, language retention among employees would be better?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We'll take that suggestion and discuss internally. Thank you so much.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

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

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sorensen, as chair of Air Canada's board of directors, you hold the highest position in the company. You're like the country's Governor General.

I have a very simple question for you: How does Air Canada handle languages other than English and French aboard its airplanes?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: You're talking about the inflight experience, if I'm not mistaken. We have employees who—not the same employee, obviously.... In total, we can offer more than 100 languages. Obviously, we tailor the languages that we offer on a given flight, as much as possible, to the clientele on that flight—i.e., a flight to Bogotá will have Spanish-speaking employees; a flight to Copenhagen will, hopefully, have somebody who speaks Danish; and so on and so forth. We do a lot.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: I want to know how French is adhered to on Air Canada flights where there's an obligation to offer the service in French.

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Yes, we have an obligation, which we're proud of, and we have standards for that also. It's one standard for designated bilingual areas, such as interprovincial—to and from Quebec and French-speaking parts of Ontario, and so on and so forth—and different standards for other flights. That is how we staff our flights: according to these different standards.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Mr. Sorensen, in an article published on July 7, your vice-president of communications said that Air Canada invites its aircrews to use a cellphone translation app. Another article talks about using the translation app on an iPad and broadcasting the message on the airplane's speakers.

Do you think that's respecting one of Canada's two founding languages?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I probably don't. I'm not familiar with that specific statement, so I'd rather not comment on it.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Mr. Sorensen, I understand you might not have read that statement.

As chair of the board of directors, will you commit before the committee to investigating whether French is treated the same as other languages, such as German, Danish or Dutch? Let's look at all languages. Would you commit, today, to investigating whether French is respected in the Canadian airline named Air Canada? I would remind you that the name of our country appears in the name of your company.

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I'm aware of that, and I can assure you it is very respected. As I said before, we have standards for bilingual services, which we do everything we can to uphold. French is definitely respected, and I commit that we will improve that stance even more in the future.

• (1720)

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Mr. Sorensen, would you commit to reporting back to us on the results of this investigation? I believe it's unacceptable for French to be treated this way on Air Canada flights, where you have an obligation to speak French and English. What do you think?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: With all due respect, I don't really agree with the premise of your question because I think that bilingual services are given extremely high priority within Air Canada, and we do everything we can—everything that's in our power—to abide by the standards we've set for offering bilingual services. We achieve that in the majority of cases. You can also see it from the development of the complaints, which are only a quarter of what they were three years ago.

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Sorensen.

Are you questioning the articles published on July 7 by Radio-Canada and Le Journal de Montréal? The Journal de Montréal article was written by journalist Raphaël Pirro. I didn't make it up.

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I'm not familiar with that specific article, but we can—

[Translation]

Joël Godin: Would you to commit to sending us a written response after an internal investigation? I understand you can't know everything, since you don't take part in operations. Can you still make a commitment here today?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I can make a commitment that I'll read the said article and we can make a comment on it.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor for five minutes.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Sorensen, thank you for joining us.

You've been chair of the board of directors at Air Canada for almost a decade now, so your testimony is all the more interesting in the context of today's meeting.

There have been major linguistic controversies at Air Canada in recent years, including the hiring of a unilingual anglophone CEO, the speech he gave at the chamber of commerce and the pre-recorded video released last spring. In addition, there were a whole series of smaller incidents, violations of the Official Languages Act, which are well documented in various annual reports of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada. On several occasions over the last few years, Air Canada has ranked at the top for the number of complaints received at the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada.

Here's my question. As chair of the board of directors, how do you view the various investigation reports, the various reports of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, and what importance do you give to the recommendations in those reports?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: We obviously take it very seriously and look at the recommendations. In terms of the number of complaints or the number of cases that have arisen around our ability to deliver bilingual services, I'd like to point out that among all the institutions that are subject to the Official Languages Act, Air Canada is by far the biggest one in terms of having the biggest number of passengers.

[Translation]

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

You mentioned that you take the recommendations of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada very seriously. Can you give us some real examples of recommendations that were implemented following a commissioner's report?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: What I can tell you is that in terms of the Canada Transportation Act, I've been advised that Air Canada always complies with our statutory obligations, including the notice

requirements and consultation framework set out in the Canada Transportation Act. There—

[Translation]

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Mr. Sorensen, I was referring more to the reports of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Under the Official Languages Act, there are obligations to meet and, when there are violations, complaints are filed and investigation reports are produced.

In your first answer, you said that you take the recommendations of the Commissioner of Official Languages very seriously. I would therefore like to ask for an example of recommendations that have been implemented under your leadership.

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I'd like to refer that question to Mr. Rheault, who works with this on a daily basis.

[Translation]

David Rheault: Thank you for the question.

When the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages makes recommendations, we always take them very seriously. I'll give you an example. We have training videos. The Office of the Commissioner recommended that employees involved in service complaints redo the training, and we've implemented that recommendation. Now, when an employee is involved in an incident with a passenger and a complaint is filed with the Office of the Commissioner, we inform the employee and ensure that they redo their initial awareness training on service in both official languages.

● (1725)

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

Mr. Sorensen, the next CEO has been hired and is someone who masters both official languages. It would have been hard to do otherwise, given what happened last spring. Will you commit to ensuring that all future Air Canada CEOs are bilingual? Is that an essential condition? If so, could you make it a company policy so that we never again have an Air Canada CEO who doesn't speak French?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: I would say, going forward, yes.

[Translation]

We are delighted to have hired a president of Anko van der Werff's stature.

[English]

He will be able to communicate in both official languages, so yes—

[Translation]

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you, Mr. Sorensen. I'm sorry to interrupt, but we're running out of time.

Finally, the commissioner tabled an investigation report in July 2026 following a complaint about flights between Montreal and Bathurst no longer being offered. One of its recommendations is to do an impact analysis of this decision in the next six months to see what can be done to mitigate the negative impacts.

Will you commit to following this recommendation from the Commissioner of Official Languages?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Decisions around route openings or discontinuations are obviously operational ones that the board is not involved in. Management makes those decisions, and they obviously follow a lot of criteria, the most important one being demand for the route and—

[Translation]

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: We're not necessarily talking about a decision on the company's day-to-day operations here. We're talking about a policy. Under the Official Languages Act, an impact analysis must be conducted after a decision is made. In this case, the impact analysis doesn't seem to have been done. My question is not necessarily about current operations. Will the impact analysis of this decision be done in the next six months, as recommended by the commissioner?

[English]

Vagn Sorensen: Yes, I think that sort of recommendation is under investigation internally, but what's important to me to say is that we did comply with our statutory obligations, including notice requirements and the consultation framework as set out in the Transportation Act, as we should. The recommendations of the commissioner are being reviewed internally for the time being.

[Translation]

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you. I was really talking about the Official Languages Act, particularly the obligations under Part VII, not necessarily the Canada Transportation Act.

Thank you for your testimony today. We appreciate it.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Sorensen, thank you for your appearance before our committee today.

I sincerely hope the members of our committee can have a strong and productive working relationship with you and your colleagues from Air Canada going forward in order to help resolve some of the

issues that members of all sides have raised with you today. I think a strong relationship is founded on transparency and honesty, so I want to share a few thoughts with you. I will be frank with you.

Air Canada, as Monsieur Godin alluded to earlier, is Canada's national airline or flag carrier. With this designation and with Air Canada's founding as a government-owned organization, as a Crown corporation, Air Canada benefits from what I think are many privileges. I'll give some examples of that. The marketing benefit of being the flag carrier is that you enjoy a quasi-monopolistic position—sometimes monopolistic and sometimes oligopolistic. Canadian law protects you from competition from foreign airlines domestically. Governments of all stripes and taxpayers have provided significant bailouts to Air Canada during difficult times for your business over the years, in the billions of dollars. Air Canada has asked for and received from governments help with labour disputes with your staff over the years.

This in part has helped lead to Air Canada's success and profitability over the years. However, in my mind, being Canada's national airline also comes with responsibilities. Some of those responsibilities include charging Canadians reasonable prices for flights. It includes providing reliable service. It includes compensating your pilots and flight attendants and staff fairly. It includes maintaining regional service to smaller communities across Canada. It includes making yourself available to MPs of committees when they occasionally ask you to present to them or testify on issues that, as you can see, are very important to many Canadians. Of course, one of the responsibilities is providing services in both official languages, as is required by Canadian law.

Unfortunately, in the view of I think many Canadians, and certainly in my view, Air Canada has all too frequently not delivered on these responsibilities. My ask of you is that you and your team take back the comments from me and from all colleagues, reflect on them and do your best to address what we all have raised so that the next time you come and present at our committee, which I hope will be soon, we'll be able to say that Air Canada not only enjoys the privileges but also fulfills the responsibilities of being Canada's national airline.

Thank you for being with us, Mr. Sorensen.

We are suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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