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of Official Languages

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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THE SENATE

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[*Translation*]

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OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. In 2003, the Government of Canada established the position of Minister Responsible for Official Languages. It was a decisive step forward for official language minority communities.

Then the Official Languages Branch was created within the Privy Council Office, the Prime Minister's department, in order to support the Minister Responsible for Official Languages in coordinating official languages programs.

On April 1, 2006, shortly after coming to power, the new Conservative government quickly decided to close this branch so that the Prime Minister could dissociate himself from the official languages file. Responsibilities were transferred from the Privy Council Office to the former secretariat, which already existed at Canadian Heritage.

When the Commissioner of Official Languages submitted his report to Parliament last week, one of the most critical findings was the lack of coherence and uneven application of the Official Languages Act from one department to the next, which most likely is attributable to the move of the Official Languages Branch from Privy Council to Canadian Heritage.

It is obvious that this move has considerably weakened the authority and decision-making power that the Official Languages Secretariat had when it was part of the Privy Council Office.

What does the government plan on doing to remedy this serious problem of governance, which may explain the mediocre results achieved by certain federal institutions and departments with respect to the application of the Official Languages Act?

[*English*]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I hope I did not hear Senator Tardif correctly when she said that the secretariat was transferred out of the Privy Council Office to what was then the Department of Heritage and the minister responsible for that department because the Prime Minister wanted to dissociate himself. If that is what she said, that is absolutely false.

Furthermore, the Commissioner of Official Languages indicated in his report that definite progress is being made and that there had been improvement in the number of institutions reporting, from 30 to 200. I do understand, thanks to questioning from Senator Champagne, that the Commissioner of Official Languages, in appearing before the Senate committee, had to be brought up to date in that of the five-year roadmap for official languages, we are only in year three. We still have two years to go. I hope that the Commissioner of Official Languages will start to work with the facts as they are rather than as reported in newspapers.