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STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH ACCESS TO FRENCH-LANGUAGE SCHOOLS AND FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

FOURTH REPORT OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES COMMITTEE
AND REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE—
DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, June 6, 2017

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

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RESPONSE—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, I would first like to pay tribute to all the senators on the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages who participated in this study, including the new senators who joined the committee at the time the draft report was being considered. I would like to highlight the participation of the Honourable Senators Raymonde Gagné, Mobina Jaffer, Ghislain Maltais and Paul McIntyre, who attended the public hearings in Vancouver and Victoria in October 2016. That site visit and the public hearings proved to be an affecting and striking experience for us all.

I would like to extend my very sincere thanks to our analyst, Marie-Ève Hudon, who is an invaluable resource for our committee, thanks to her expertise and her tremendous professionalism, and to our clerk, Kevin Pittman, for his constant support and good advice. They both work to ensure that our committee runs smoothly.

I would also like to thank our communications officer, Geneviève Sicard, who was fully committed to our study, from start to finish, and set up our very successful press conference in Vancouver. In addition, I sincerely congratulate the communications team on the quality of the communication tools and of the report.

My heartfelt thanks go to our colleague, Senator Gagné, who was also present at the press conference, for her support and her commitment.

On behalf of the committee, I express our gratitude to the 55 witnesses who participated in the public hearings in British Columbia and Ottawa. Their contribution was invaluable to our study. We were delighted to meet over 150 people during our on-site visits.

Honourable senators, on April 20, 2016, the Senate authorized the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages to study the challenges associated with access to French-language schools and French immersion programs in British Columbia. This was why the committee traveled to Vancouver and Victoria in October 2016 to obtain an accurate picture of the opportunities for French-language learning in that province, knowing that it faces major challenges relating to both French-language schools and French immersion programs. We observed first-hand the scope of the challenges that the people we met are facing.

Honourable senators, what the members of the committee also took from their experience in British Columbia is the bold choice that some parents are making to have their children educated in

French. We were impressed, too, with the passion of the teachers and the francophone and francophile leaders, who are determined to transmit the love of French and the desire to see it flourish to the younger generation. Looking beyond the enormous problems of access and lack of resources, we see the community actors' strong resilience and determination to ensure that French is fully recognized. We encourage them to persevere and we offer them our heartfelt thanks.

Education in French as a first language and French as a second language is very popular, and demand continues to grow year after year in British Columbia. Attendance at francophone schools grew by more than 75 per cent between 1997 and 2014, while demand for French immersion programs rose by 65 per cent over the same period. Unfortunately, the supply does not meet the demand.

In British Columbia, the struggle for equality in education and access to French second language programs plays out against a backdrop marked by a shortage of available places, non-existent or obsolete infrastructure, overcrowded schools, and often inadequate school transportation. In addition, the education continuum, from early childhood through post-secondary, is by no means assured. There is also a shortage of qualified teachers, and the funding does not increase at the same rate as enrolments. There are glaring, unfilled needs.

Honourable senators, allow me to describe the unbelievable situation of the francophone schools in British Columbia. Some schools admit more students than their actual capacity to accommodate them. In Vancouver, the Rose-des-Vents school houses 350 students in facilities originally designed for 200 students. In addition, it is estimated that in this large school catchment area, approximately 1,200 students could have the right to receive an education in French and to enrol in this school. The Anne-Hébert school was built for 1,400 students, but houses more than 400. In Victoria, Victor-Brodeur school accommodates more than 700 students in facilities designed 10 years ago for 500 children.

In addition, some French-language schools have to lease space in English-language schools. For example, Passerelle school in Whistler and La Vallée school in Pemberton occupy part of the premises in neighbouring English-language schools. At La Vallée, the students are placed in portable classrooms attached to the English-language school or in a community centre that is a 20-minute walk away. Even more bewildering is the fact that the principal of the school does not have space to meet with students' parents, and the meetings have to be held in a public coffee shop.

As you can see, honourable senators, the very mission of the school is in jeopardy, since the local environment does not foster the transmission of French language and culture to the children. That is why expanding the schools or building new schools is one of the most urgent demands made by the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique.

Honourable senators, starting in 2010, the francophones of British Columbia have brought numerous actions in the courts to compel the provincial government to acknowledge its

constitutional duties in respect of French first language education, as is guaranteed by section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Rose-des-Vents school case remains unresolved, even after the Supreme Court of Canada, in 2015, upheld francophone parents' right to have their children receive French first-language education and obtain an educational experience equivalent to what is provided to their counterparts in the majority schools. The Court showed that the educational services offered at the Rose-des-Vents school were not equivalent in terms of school infrastructure and the services offered, as compared to English-language schools.

In its September 2016 ruling, the Supreme Court of British Columbia recognized systemic problems with the funding of French first-language education. Because school transportation has been underfunded for a decade, the Court ordered the province to pay \$6 million in damages to the Conseil scolaire francophone. Some aspects of that decision have been appealed by both parties.

With regard to French immersion programs, the parents and their children face insurmountable challenges, such as waitlists and lottery systems, the lack of nearby schools, a shortage of qualified teachers, and the lack of programs and opportunities to learn French at the postsecondary level. The shortage of programs means that some children are deprived of the benefits of learning another language and leads young people to abandon French because they are not able to envision their future in that language.

Honourable senators, our report, entitled *Toward Stronger Support of French-language Learning in British Columbia*, contains 17 recommendations that relate to five departments to enable the federal government to honour its official languages commitments. It further calls on the government of British Columbia, with the support of the federal government, to work with French education stakeholders in implementing certain recommendations. The recommendations that are based on the experience of British Columbia apply to all Canadians who are in similar situations.

The conclusions and recommendations in our report are addressed to three groups: francophone schools, French immersion programs and the francophonie of British Columbia as a whole, including francophones and francophiles. The first group represents rights holders under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. They are francophone parents who are entitled to first language education for their children. In the course of our study, we learned that the francophone schools of British Columbia are attended by only about 25 per cent to 30 per cent of eligible children.

The second group is composed of residents of British Columbia whose right to instruction in French is not guaranteed by the constitution, but who want their children to study French as a second language or even as a third or fourth language. Demand for this is very high.

Part VII of the Official Languages Act also provides for support for the development of official language minority communities in Canada through positive measures.

[English]

The Official Languages Act outlines the federal government's obligation to fostering the full recognition and use of both English and French in Canadian society. The Canadian government, in collaboration with its provincial-territorial counterparts, must commit to supporting the learning of both official languages.

Our report targets four areas where action is needed: improving access to francophone schools, increasing bilingualism among young people, reviewing the funding mechanism and improving accountability, and supporting the vitality of French-language-minority communities.

[Translation]

Seven of our recommendations aim to ensure better access to francophone schools. I would like to present a few of those recommendations.

To improve access to francophone schools, the committee recommends that the federal government assist the Conseil scolaire francophone in acquiring federal lands that are 50 per cent owned by the Canada Lands Company, to meet its glaring needs for school infrastructure. We urge the Minister of Public Services and Procurement to intervene with the Canada Lands Company to provide for the acquisition of these lands to build two schools that will meet the needs of Vancouver's francophone community.

The testimony showed that more has to be invested in new infrastructure and in renovating existing infrastructure. It is urgent that the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in negotiating the new Protocol for Agreements on Education and the next multi-year official languages plan, conclude a special agreement with British Columbia's Ministry of Education to respond to the pressing infrastructure needs of the francophone community and guarantee the recognition of its rights under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Part VII of the Official Languages Act.

Support for the development of a francophone linguistic and cultural identity, as well as student retention in the French-language school system, are key priorities. The committee has issued a call to action, asking the federal government to reconsider the recommendations it outlined in June 2005, recommendations that remain relevant in 2017.

The recommendations include establishing a real continuum of minority-language education, from early childhood to the post-secondary level.

The programs offered in French in the province's post-secondary institutions should be expanded so that young francophones and francophiles can continue their education in French beyond high school. The Department of Canadian Heritage needs to allocate more funding to meet that need.

In preparation for the 2021 Census of Population, it is urgent that Statistics Canada design and test new questions on school attendance so that the Conseil scolaire francophone, the French school board, has useful projections for determining the number of students who would be eligible for such schools. Right now, the actual number of right holders is based on a rough estimate. We need to take action, because the situation is critical.

The committee is asking the Minister of Canadian Heritage to commit to allocating more funding to the Intergovernmental Cooperation on Minority Language Education by 2018 for school infrastructure and transportation for French schools and post-secondary institutions so that French teachers have access to basic and ongoing training.

[English]

With regard to French immersion programs in B.C., parents who want their children to receive French second language education face major barriers. Waiting lists and lottery systems, the lack of nearby schools, a shortage of qualified teachers and the lack of post-secondary opportunities in French are some of the barriers facing those wishing to attend French immersion programs.

Our committee recommends that the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in collaboration with British Columbia's Ministry of Education, ensure access everywhere and for everyone to French immersion programs in British Columbia and commit to increased and sustained funding for these programs.

One of the challenges related to access to French-language learning opportunities in British Columbia concerns the admission of an increasingly diverse francophone and francophile population. Many francophone immigrants have settled in the province and want to give their children the opportunity to learn one of Canada's two official languages. However, testimony showed that there are gaps in the promotion of available French language education programs. Often the reception and integration services offered to immigrants are not available in French. Therefore, the committee recommends that the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship in collaboration with British Columbia's Minister of Education ensure that French-speaking immigrants are well-informed on the opportunities to access French-language education in the province.

The Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction with the provinces and territories will expire in 2018. The committee believes that solutions must be found to ensure that the use of funds is consistent with federal government objectives and community expectations.

Therefore, the committee recommends that the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in negotiating the next protocol for agreements on education, undertake to include more stringent provisions on money invested in federal-provincial-territorial agreements, and undertake field validations to follow up on the activity and financial reports received from the Ministries of Education in the provinces and territories, as recommended by the Commissioner of Official Languages.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, those are just a few examples of the recommendations set out in our report, entitled *Toward Stronger Support of French-language Learning in British Columbia*. This report was very well received at the press conference that

Senator Gagné and I participated in last Wednesday. I would like to share some of the comments that we received.

Bertrand Dupuis, the superintendent of the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique said that our report was a gift for the school board and for francophones.

[English]

Canadian Parents for French, B.C. and Yukon branch, stated with regard to our report:

“Your recommendations match Canadian parents for French values.”

[Translation]

The superintendent of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, Alain Laberge, expressed his appreciation as follows:

... this type of report is essential to the survival of francophone and French immersion programs in our provinces and territories. The recommendations made by the committee are a salve for old wounds. I can unequivocally say that many of my colleagues will appreciate the work that you have done.

Marie-France Lapierre, chair of the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique, said the following, and I quote:

The recommendations set out in the committee's report will certainly guide the progress of this file in the province. The French school board is grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute to the committee's project and welcomes it with the hope of a positive outcome for right holders in British Columbia.

We received a number of press releases, including that of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, which commended the committee for its recommendation to modernize the census so that right holders are counted. In its press release, the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones said that it was thrilled with the recommendations set out in the committee's report.

In closing, honourable colleagues, the members of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages sincerely hope that the federal government takes note of our recommendations and works with the provincial government to implement them.

[English]

This is an opportunity for the federal and provincial governments to prove they are serious about addressing the problems present in British Columbia.

This year, Canada is celebrating the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Confederation, and 2019 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Official Languages Act. There could be no more appropriate time for the federal government to commit to promoting Canada's two official languages and strengthening learning opportunities in British Columbia.