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OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Recommendations of
Commissioner of Official Languages

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, October 7, 2014

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

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RECOMMENDATIONS OF COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Today, Mr. Leader, the Commissioner of Official Languages released his 2013-14 annual report to Parliament. This is a very important time for linguistic duality and bilingualism in our country. Linguistic duality is a core value for all Canadians.

In presenting his report, in which he makes two major recommendations, the Commissioner underscored the following, and I quote:

At the same time, a number of federal institutions still have a way to go before their compliance can be qualified as exemplary. For want of proper planning and monitoring, some of these institutions failed to meet their language obligations when they made major budget cuts or reorganizations.

To conclude, the Commissioner added this:

All federal institutions should therefore take the necessary steps to comply fully with the Act right from the outset—not after a complaint, an unsatisfactory audit, a disappointing report card grade or a court case.

Mr. Leader, I would like to hear your comments on this report and have you explain how the government will respond to these new recommendations.

Hon. Claude Carignan (Leader of the Government): Thank you, Senator Tardif, for your question. We would also like to thank the Commissioner of Official Languages for his report. You quoted some excerpts, passages and conclusions. I would like to quote from page 29 of his report, where the Commissioner said the following, and I quote:

In 2013—2014, all federal institutions evaluated demonstrated that they take measures to create an environment conducive to the use of both official languages and to encourage the use of English and French in the workplace in regions designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes.

This good news is found in the report by the Commissioner of Official Languages. Clearly, we recognize that francophone and anglophone communities contribute to the cultural, social and economic vitality of our society.

As I said, we created the new Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages and we have made the most comprehensive investment in Canada's official languages in our country's history: funding of \$1.1 billion. I believe that is indisputable.

I would also like to point out that today, over 2.4 million young Canadians are learning either English or French as a second language and that 356,580 students across the country were enrolled in immersion programs in 2011-12, which represents an increase of 18.7 per cent since 2006-07.

The Commissioner makes note of this on page 23 of his report, where he says:

Canadian Heritage uses several best practices when making transfer payments to promote second-language instruction and minority-language education.

Some people see the glass as being half empty and some see it as being half full. I know that you see it as being half empty, but I think that we need to look at the practical measures that have been taken. The \$1.1 billion in funding under the new Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages represents a comprehensive investment — the largest in our country's history — and it will contribute to the vitality of our two official languages.

Senator Tardif: Thank you for that information, Mr. Leader. Some of the findings are certainly positive, and I recognize that. However, are you aware that the Commissioner of Official Languages published a report on June 27, 2014, to follow up on the recommendations that he made in his reports over the past seven years, from 2007 to 2014? I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this report clearly shows that only 19.6 per cent of the recommendations or parts of the recommendations were implemented. Less than one-quarter of the recommendations were implemented in seven years. The Commissioner makes recommendations every year in his annual report. He made a compilation of those recommendations, which shows that less than 20 per cent of them were implemented.

Leader, how do you explain this disappointingly low percentage of the Commissioner's recommendations that were implemented by the government?

Senator Carignan: Senator Tardif, you said two things about the report of the Commissioner of Official Languages that resonate with me. First, to me, the quote on page 29 is an important aspect of the government's record on official languages, and I would like to read it again:

In 2013-14, all federal institutions evaluated demonstrated that they take measures to create an environment conducive to the use of both official languages and to encourage the use of English and French in the workplace in regions designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes.

The percentage that impresses me is the 18.7 per cent increase in the number of young Canadians who have participated in French or English immersion programs since 2006-07. These practical measures and numbers speak for themselves. Thanks to the \$1.1 billion in funding for the new roadmap, we are

in excellent shape to continue promoting the use of both our official languages by Canadians.

Senator Tardif: Thank you, leader. There is no doubt that the number of young Canadians who can learn both official languages is beneficial to Canada as a whole and to all Canadians. I agree.

The recommendations touch on the activities in federal institutions subject to the Official Languages Act.

• (1430)

Leader, how will the government implement the very important recommendations of the Commissioner of Official Languages?

Senator Carignan: Senator, as you said, the report was tabled. As with any report, we are studying it. We will continue to study the report, but it is important to consider the amounts invested in official languages.

The \$1.1 billion envelope for the new roadmap represents the most comprehensive investment in Canada's history. You are in no position to criticize the practical actions taken by the government to promote the official languages. These were noted by the Commissioner on page 29 of his 2013-14 report, which I have quoted twice already.

Our practical actions speak for themselves. For example, the number of youth enrolled in an immersion program in their second language, whether English or French, increased by 18.7 per cent. We will continue our efforts.
