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STUDY ON THE IMPACTS OF RECENT CHANGES TO THE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM ON OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITY COMMUNITIES

Fourth Report of Official Languages Committee and
Request for Government Response—Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, December 4, 2014

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

STUDY ON THE IMPACTS OF RECENT CHANGES TO THE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM ON OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITY COMMUNITIES

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

The Senate proceeded to consideration of the fourth report of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages, entitled *Seizing the Opportunity: The role of communities in a constantly changing immigration system*, tabled in the Senate on December 2, 2014.

Hon. Claudette Tardif moved:

That the fourth report of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages, entitled *Seizing the Opportunity: The role of communities in a constantly changing immigration system*, tabled in the Senate on Tuesday, December 2, 2014, be adopted and that, pursuant to rule 12-24(1), the Senate request a complete and detailed response from the government, with the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration being identified as minister responsible for responding to the report.

She said: Honourable senators, I am pleased to speak to the motion to adopt the fourth report of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages, entitled *Seizing the Opportunity: The role of communities in a constantly changing immigration system*, tabled in this chamber on Tuesday, December 2, 2014.

I would like to begin by thanking Senator Fortin-Duplessis, deputy chair of the committee, for her important contribution to the committee's work and the preparation of this report. I would also like to thank my honourable colleagues, Senators Chaput, Charette-Poulin, Maltais, McIntyre and Poirier, for their active participation in the committee's work on this file. Of course, I would also like to thank the senators who participated occasionally, but who nevertheless played a very important role in this study. I would like to acknowledge the outstanding work of our analyst, Marie-Ève Hudon, and our clerk, Daniel Charbonneau. I thank them most sincerely on behalf of the committee. All members of the committee would like to express their gratitude to the witnesses who agreed to share their knowledge and suggestions.

In April 2013, the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages began a study of the impact of the most recent immigration reforms on official language minority communities. The committee held 15 meetings to study the issue and 44 witnesses attended to share their views.

The committee examined changes made since the beginning of the 41st Parliament and those that will be implemented by the end of 2014 and in 2015, including legislative or regulatory amendments, decrees approved by the Governor-in-Council, spending reallocations and ministerial instructions.

The objective of the nine recommendations presented by the Senate committee to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration is to ensure that the department fully meets all its language obligations — namely those in Part VII of the Official Languages

Act, which requires that the government take positive action to support francophone immigration — and fulfills the terms of section 3 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which seeks “to enrich and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of Canadian society, while respecting the federal, bilingual and multicultural character of Canada; . . . to support and assist the development of minority official languages communities in Canada.” The intent behind this report's recommendations is to make it possible for francophone and anglophone communities in Canada to seize the opportunities available to them in a constantly changing immigration system.

As a result of demographic and sociological changes, immigration has become a determining factor for the future and the vitality of official language minority communities, which have made immigration a priority in order to ensure their long-term development.

Honourable senators, the government has undertaken a major reform of the immigration system, making the economy the central focus of those changes and giving employers a more important role to play.

Since immigration is an area of shared jurisdiction, most of the witnesses stressed the importance of coordination among the various stakeholders. The federal government has a role to play in supporting the development of official language minority communities through immigration. This objective has economic and demographic benefits that are unique to each region. A coordinated national strategy, which requires everyone to participate, must therefore take into account the various partners and the unique characteristics of each region.

Your committee therefore made its first extremely important recommendation:

That Citizenship and Immigration Canada, in cooperation with all of its partners and in consultation with official language minority communities, quickly develop a coordinated national strategy to support the development of these communities through immigration. This strategy must identify the roles and responsibilities of the various partners and be flexible enough to take into account the unique characteristics of each region.

Honourable senators, since I don't have enough time to present the entire report — and I realize that it is already late — I would like to draw your attention to four main observations that stood out from all the witness testimony we heard during the course of this study.

First of all, with respect to economic immigration and the more prominent role given to employers, Citizenship and Immigration Canada must ensure that francophone immigrants can register in the pool of qualified candidates in the new Express Entry system without hindering the recognition of their foreign credentials. With the implementation of the Express Entry system in 2015, employers will be called on to play a key role in recruiting newcomers.

• (1710)

The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, or FCFA, stated that anglophone employers have to be convinced of two things. First, these employers must be reassured that, in general, immigrants who settle in minority linguistic communities are bilingual, and if they aren't, they can take language training.

Second, employers have to understand that there are francophone immigration networks that offer support to families.

The FCFA noted the importance of looking at this through a francophone lens to ensure that the communities' needs are being recognized. It also indicated that it would like to assist in developing such a tool. Other witnesses also spoke in favour of this francophone lens. Technical concerns about the new system were expressed in a brief to the Senate committee, and I quote:

The FCFA and others [francophone minority communities] stakeholders have raised concerns about the inclusion of French-speaking immigrants in the pool of candidates. This concern is based, in particular, on the difficulties associated with the recognition of foreign credentials. . . . Thus, it is likely that the requirement to provide an educational credential assessment at the outset of the process prevents many potential French-speaking immigrants from submitting an EOI and being placed in the pool of qualified candidates.

A francophone representative from Alberta was more pessimistic when he appeared before committee. He made the following statement, and I quote:

We feel that the important role employers are offered to play in the selection of immigrants, coupled with the major involvement provinces and territories with have in this file — and none of this is subject to language obligations — could dilute the federal government's commitments toward official language minority communities.

That is a very worrisome statement.

Honourable senators, the Express Entry system is one of the changes to the immigration system that has attracted the most attention from researchers and community stakeholders. A number of them are concerned that too much emphasis is being put on selecting English-speaking candidates. A 2013 report stated:

It will be necessary to approach Anglophone employers to select French-speaking immigrants.

Another important finding from the study is that official language minority communities will have to move from a reactive to a proactive role. Some witnesses spoke about mounting a charm offensive to persuade newcomers to settle in francophone minority communities. A number of witnesses said that Citizenship and Immigration Canada must maintain an approach designed by and for the communities when it comes to current and future changes.

Communities are now more certain than ever of the potential that immigration represents for their vitality. However, the only way they will achieve the desired results is to have the necessary resources at their disposal. It is recommended that the minister pay special attention to providing ongoing and enhanced support for francophone immigration networks; providing support for French-language pre-departure services; promoting the communities abroad; and considering the special needs of refugees, temporary workers and international students.

That was a key recommendation in this report. The representatives from official language minority communities who appeared before your committee all stressed the importance of consultation. The Commissioner of Official Languages said that it was important to consult these communities to understand their needs with respect to recruiting, welcoming and settling newcomers.

The report contains two recommendations on targeted positive measures to promote francophone immigration that the government could implement. They are as follows:

That the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration pay special attention to the following positive measure, namely recruitment initiatives targeting francophone countries.

That Citizenship and Immigration Canada recognize the following:

- the Provincial Nominee Program and the Canadian Experience Class must attract a sufficient number of francophone immigrants;
- the Express Entry system must include a francophone lens so that francophone and Acadian communities can capitalize on targeted positive measures; and
- these communities must participate in developing the tools to promote immigration to their communities.

Witnesses talked about the importance of working with immigrants before they arrive in Canada. They need specific and helpful information about the reality of the job market in which they want to get established, because it is not uncommon to come across immigrants who are disappointed at not finding a job that matches their skills and experience. Before immigrants decide to settle in a minority community, it is best that they are fully informed about the community in question.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada must also provide francophone and anglophone communities with solid data to help them capitalize on the changes made. The communities need to have up-to-date statistics in order to better target their efforts.

A representative from Statistics Canada had this to say when he testified at the standing committee, and I quote:

In this respect, community stakeholders have expressed great interest in having Statistics Canada conduct a survey of the French-speaking immigrants outside Quebec so that they can be better equipped to face the challenges of the coming decades.

[English]

In December 2013, the Quebec Community Groups Network Board of Directors passed a resolution regarding the research priorities of Quebec's anglophone communities related to immigration. The resolution identified six research priorities and three principles for conducting them:

- Tie research to objectives that provide a concrete and direct benefit to Quebec's anglophone communities.
- Support research that strengthens the communities by fostering collaboration, networking, the sharing of best practices and resources leveraging.
- Focus on research into economic improvement, family support and the integration of English-speaking newcomers to Quebec through anglophone community institutions.

The anglophone communities want to encourage the Quebec government, with federal support, to work with anglophone organizations to identify the resources available in the regions and help Quebec achieve the immigration objective. At this time,

neither the federal nor the provincial government shows any sign of openness in this respect. An integrated approach is desirable.

[*Translation*]

Proficiency in the official languages, especially English, is a determining factor in whether immigrants are able to successfully integrate into our society. Access to language training is not guaranteed everywhere or for all categories of economic immigrants. Citizenship and Immigration Canada must support the pivotal role that French post-secondary institutions in Canada play in the new immigration system. It must increase access to language training programs in all of the regions and allow temporary foreign workers and international students to register for these programs.

The public hearings showed that a knowledge of English is particularly important to economic integration, while a knowledge of French is important for social and cultural integration. A representative of Statistics Canada indicated that the unemployment rate of francophone immigrants who do not speak English is 3 per cent higher, despite the fact that they have a high level of education. Although every immigrant's experience is different, witnesses all emphasized the importance of learning English. Training that focused on both official languages would promote the economic integration of newcomers in English while broadening their social network in French.

What is more, the public hearings showed that post-secondary institutions are being called upon to play a leadership role in the new immigration system. Year after year, these institutions are welcoming a growing number of international students.

As one researcher found, the government is focusing more and more on this type of immigration. He said:

We now recognize that one of the reasons for recruiting foreign students is to retain them.

May I have five more minutes, please?

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, is more time granted?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Tardif: The researcher went on to say:

This is a very important vehicle for the minority communities because it is a vehicle that we control. We have post-secondary institutions that are capable of recruiting foreign students, of bringing them in and of having them live in our communities for three, four, five or six years before they move on to permanent residence. This is becoming another way to consolidate their emotional attachment to the minority community.

• (1720)

The fourth key theme is the federal government targets established in 2003 for increasing the number of francophone immigrants settling in minority communities. A target of 4.4 per cent by 2008 was initially set and subsequently lowered, allowing the government until 2013 to achieve a proportion of 1.8 per cent for French-speaking immigrants settling outside Quebec, and until 2023 to achieve the initial target of 4.4 per cent. In 2013, in the wake of changes to foster economic

immigration, the government set a new target of 4 per cent for French-speaking economic immigrants by 2018.

To achieve that target, Citizenship and Immigration Canada must include a francophone lens in the Express Entry system, the Provincial Nominee Program and the Canadian Experience Class. The testimony heard by the Senate committee suggests some doubt about whether these targets can be met. There was no clear indication in the public hearings as to what variables the department uses to calculate the number of French-speaking immigrants to Canada. As pointed out by one Statistics Canada official, the government's targets are not enough to compensate for the decreased demographic weight of francophone and Acadian communities.

Honourable senators, since immigration is a critical issue for official language minority communities, I am sure you will agree, based on the findings of this report, that it is both urgent and extremely important for federal and provincial governments to work together to include a genuine francophone lens in their immigration policies and programs. Immigration should be a powerful developmental tool for these communities and a truly positive force.

It is crucial that this report's recommendations be implemented because francophone and anglophone minority communities must derive tangible benefits from immigration in the very near future. Their very survival is at stake.

The following quote from the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada clearly sums up the expectations that communities have of Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

The reform of the immigration system continues, and the changes have not been fully implemented. Although the communities have adapted many of their activities and practices to ensure their relevance and effectiveness in the new immigration context, that in no way diminishes governments' responsibility to ensure that the recent changes to the immigration system have a positive impact on Francophone communities.

Statistics Canada anticipates that by 2050, renewal of the majority of the population will be due to immigration. That is another reason to redouble our efforts to increase immigration to official language minority communities.

In closing, I would like to quote what the Commissioner of Official Languages said on October 30:

We've reached a turning point. In the past year, the federal government has renewed its commitment to addressing the shortage of Francophone immigrants. Meanwhile, we are just months away from one of the most substantial immigration system reforms in our history. Right now, we have an opportunity to transform immigration into a truly positive force for Francophone communities outside Quebec. We cannot let it pass us by.

Honourable senators, I strongly recommend that you support this motion, read the report and adopt it.

Thank you.

(On motion of Senator Martin, for Senator Fortin-Duplessis, debate adjourned.)