



Study on the use of the Internet, new media and social media and respect for Canadians' language rights.

A study on Air Canada's obligations under the Official Languages Act.

**Remarks to the
Standing Committee on Official Languages**

Monday, November 14, 2011

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Good evening Senator Chaput, Senator Champagne, and honourable members of the Senate Standing Committee on Official Languages. We are very pleased to be back to assist you in your work.

We would like to begin by offering – on behalf of Canada’s English linguistic minority communities – the English-speaking Community of Quebec, our deep appreciation to this committee for its report *The Vitality of Quebec’s English-speaking Communities: From Myth to Reality*. Your foresight in embarking on this historic study, your personal commitment to the project, your perseverance in ensuring the report would be used to benefit the community, and most of all the wisdom and experience you imparted in the report’s recommendation make this remarkable piece of work practical, profound, and personal. The study not only provides a superb descriptive source of information on our community, but prescriptive recommendations arriving at a time of reflection on the Government of Canada's official languages strategy, and planning for the government’s continuing support to our two official languages and minority linguistic communities.

The QCGN has been invited to appear today, to provide our views on two studies being undertaken by the committee: one on the use of the Internet, new media and social media and respect for Canadians’ language rights; and, the other on Air Canada’s obligations under the Official Languages Act. In preparation for our appearance today, we reviewed – amongst other things - the evidence of the committee’s meetings of October 24, 27, and 31 and relevant reports and audits of the Commissioner of Official Languages. We have been in contact with Air Canada, and reviewed Air Canada’s Linguistic Action Plan. We have also received input from the English Language Arts Network, whom you heard from during the study.

We will now share our thoughts on Air Canada’s obligations under the Official Languages Act. We know that under section 10 of the *Air Canada Public Participation Act*, the Official Languages Act applies to that corporation. The QCGN notes that the focus of Air Canada’s performance meeting its statutory obligation under the Official Languages Act has been on Part

IV – Communications with and Services to the Public – and Part V – Language of Work. We understand the impetus for this focus. We also firmly and completely support the right of Canadians to be served and to work in the official language of their choice by and within federal institutions where provided by law and regulation. The QCGN knows of no evidence that Air Canada fails to live up to its Part IV and V obligations relating to the English language. For our community, the issue is not language, the focus of Parts IV and V, but the vitality and sustainability of our communities.

The QCGN's concern with Air Canada's obligations under the Official Languages Act therefore relates to Part VII, the advancement of English and French. As we here all know, Air Canada has a duty to ensure that positive measures are taken to enhance the vitality of Canada's English linguistic minority communities; supporting and assisting their development. There does not seem to be an understanding on Air Canada's part that this obligation exists. For example, Air Canada – in its response to Recommendation 11 of the Commissioner of Official Languages' Audit of Service Delivery in English and French to Air Canada Passengers – offered the following:

“Air Canada consults and participates with the language minority communities for special occasions or events such as the Vancouver Olympic Games, la Place de la Francophonie, les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie and le Festival du Voyageur. It also consults with minority communities for recruiting activities. Air Canada is sensitive to community members' needs and is constantly looking at improving its service and meeting the needs of customers.”

The QCGN is not aware of an occasion when Air Canada has consulted with the English-speaking Community of Quebec. Our Director of Policy, Research and Public Affairs sent a message to Air Canada to verify this, and I would like to quote from the reply received from Air Canada:

“Air Canada had not yet planned to meet with the Quebec English Communities as our focus is mainly with the French minorities groups outside Quebec. The reason for this decision is mainly due to our challenge to provide an equal service to French-speaking population in general.”

We are pleased to say that Air Canada has agreed to meet with the QCGN and explore how they could better serve and meet the needs of the Quebec English Community. The QCGN believes that Air Canada’s consultation with the English-speaking Community of Quebec will be a mutually beneficial process. Recall that ours is the most diverse of Canada’s linguistic minority communities. Half of Montreal’s Anglophone population was born outside of Quebec. Tourism is a major economic engine for Quebec’s regional English-speaking communities. We are confident that ways can be found to help Air Canada fulfill its Part VII commitments in a positive and mutually reinforcing way.

We would be happy to provide the committee with an update on this matter.

We would now like to offer our observations on the committee’s study on the use of the Internet, new media and social media and respect for Canadians’ language rights. To be clear, we understand the issue to be framed in terms of the constitutional language rights of Canadians, and constitutional provisions for official language “equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and Government of Canada.” We believe the President of The Treasury Board, and the senior staff who briefed this committee made clear the Government of Canada’s commitment to ensuring that access to government programmes and services in both official languages would be ensured using the new communication tools available through Web 2.0. We are confident, based on the Government of Canada’s current practices, and stated intentions that this will be done.

We also noted the discussion on October 31st that Web 2.0 promises to ensure increased access to services in both official languages, and increase the ability to work in the official language of one's choice no matter where a Canadian is geographically located. This promise however raises questions. How for example will information or communications specific to a region be managed? Will a federal office operating in Rouyn-Noranda be allowed to have its own Twitter or Facebook account? If not, how will flexibility and regionally specific information and service be provided within this emerging medium? If so, will the service be available in French and English? If not – because the numbers do not warrant it – then French services will be specific and regionally relevant, and English services – provided from Montreal or Ottawa – will be general and provided by someone without local perspective. This is already the case for individual members of our community and the community sector operating outside of Montreal. Does this violate the substantive equality provisions of *DesRochers v. Canada*?

Finally we are interested in discussing the role that government plays as a partner in using the tools available to us through modern digital communication networks. This committee is familiar with the Community Learning Centres that serve our communities. These CLCs are linked through a video-conferencing network that has allowed our young people from remote areas to connect with the most remarkable places – including space. It permits community workers and volunteers to share ideas, work collaboratively on projects, and participate in wider community discussions and consultations. Federal support maintains the QCGN website, Facebook page and Twitter account. Through these tools, our leaders and stakeholders remain connected and we are able to outreach to new audiences and innovate in our communications. Sometimes, these platforms are the best way to communicate with some of our stakeholders, promote our next big event or get on the media and politicians' radar screen. Another very important point for our communities is that social networks are available to all organizations, which allows us to better promote our members activities and support the regions.

An electronic clipping service specific to the English-speaking Community of Quebec and official languages in general is produced for the QCGN daily, and distributed to 800 clients (many of

whom are government stakeholders). In fact, we receive frequently requests from our government stakeholders to publish information on their departments in our news clippings.

We also observe that more and more people have an interest in what we do from sections of our website they visit the most, or from their keyword searches.

We mention all of this to demonstrate that we as a community and our government stakeholders are already deeply invested in the Internet, new media and social media in support of our language rights.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. We look forward to your questions.