



Notes for an address by the ACFA President, Ms. Nathalie Lachance

To the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance
As part of the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2024 Budget

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Hello everyone!

My name is Nathalie Lachance and I'm President of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, the ACFA. With me is our Executive Director, Isabelle Laurin.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today.

Since 1926, the ACFA has been defending the gains of Alberta's Francophonie, advancing its rights, and enhancing its vitality. The ACFA represents more than 261,000 French-speaking Albertans, a growing Francophonie, and more than 50 francophone organizations.

As a member of the *Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada* (FCFA), the ACFA supports the recommendations put forward by the FCFA in its brief presented to your committee last August. I take the opportunity of my presence here to revisit some of these recommendations, and to add a few points about the realities faced by our Francophone communities in Alberta.

Last April, the ACFA enthusiastically welcomed the Action Plan for Official Languages 2023-2028, which included a historic, but temporary, increase in investment in official languages. Although the federal government increased the amounts earmarked for core funding of organizations operating within Canada's Francophonie, these amounts fell short of the FCFA's recommendations to avoid the breaking point for organizations. In our opinion, core funding should be increased in the next budget.

Before the pandemic and inflation, many organizations were already struggling to make ends meet. This reality has only intensified over the past year. Rising rent costs. Increased event organization costs. Increased travel costs. Departure of employees, in a context of labor shortage, as they find better-paid jobs elsewhere. Inevitable deficits to meet deliverables. The need to act is urgent. That's not to mention the organizations that receive no core funding, like our community media, and which have also seen their federal advertising revenues plummet.

To add to the problem, here we are 7 months after the unveiling of the Action Plan, and none of the funding and programs planned for the current fiscal year has been confirmed and allocated to our Francophone communities. We're still waiting, even though the federal government should be distributing these funds now, and it's important to note that they must be spent by March 31. Meanwhile, our organizations are having to cut back on their operations. Successful programs are also being put on hold. In a minority situation, we don't have the luxury of advancing funds and risking the future of our organizations while we wait for the federal government to sort out the paperwork to distribute the funds. These delays are far from a positive measure, as intended by the *Official Languages Act*. They weaken our Francophone communities.

In our opinion, Alberta's Francophonie is experiencing an additional problem related to the significant growth of its French-speaking population over the past 20 to 30 years. The federal government must review its funding envelopes to reflect these new realities. Alberta often

mentions that it wants its fair share from the federal government. The same is true for Alberta's Francophonie.

This is true for French-language education, whether through Francophone or French immersion schools, which is crucial to Alberta's Francophonie. The Official Languages in Education Program (OLEP) envelope for Alberta hasn't changed in several agreements, despite the fact that our population and educational needs have grown significantly. It's time for the federal government to recognize that we need to review these amounts. The data released by Statistics Canada on Section 23 Charter rights holders now supports what our Francophone school boards have known and said for many years.

Last June, the ACFA also welcomed the modernization of the *Official Languages Act*. More than six years of work have been invested, both by the federal government and representatives of Francophone communities, such as the ACFA. The federal government must provide adequate funding for the implementation of the new *Act* in its next budget. This is fundamental.

Without this funding, the federal government will not have the means and resources to meet the new requirements imposed by the Act. Just think of IRCC, which is now obliged to implement a strong Francophone immigration policy to increase the demographic weight of Francophone minority communities. To achieve this, it is imperative to fund a real strategy for the internationalization of the Francophonie. Or again, CBC French and its regional stations that serve our Francophone communities, including Alberta, and whose fears of cuts are already worrying us. And our community organizations, which are already at breaking point, will have new workloads added to them to respond to countless requests for consultations or evidence from federal departments.

Finally, when it comes to transferring funds to the provinces and territories for various initiatives, the federal government must continue to include language clauses. In Alberta, for example, we have seen major advances in health and early childhood over the past year, as transfer agreements have included language clauses. Without these clauses, French-language services are not automatically provided by our provinces, to the detriment of Francophone communities.

Thank you for your attention.