

Good afternoon, honourable senators.

My name is Daniel-Robert Gooch, president of the Canadian Airports Council. Thank you for inviting me and my airport colleagues before your committee here today.

Allow me to open by telling you a little bit about our national association. The CAC is the voice of Canada's airports community. We number 48 members operating more than 100 airports across the country—both large and small. This includes all of Canada's international gateways, all the privately operated National Airports System airport authorities, and many other local airports as well.

Our mission is simple: we work to safeguard the safety and security of Canada's aviation sector while promoting growth in travellers and goods to, from, through and within Canada.

Air transportation is an economic growth enabler, with airports serving as the essential infrastructure that connects communities from coast to coast to coast. Airports also link Canadian businesses with international markets to facilitate trade. Not least, our airports help boost a tourism industry that contributes \$88 billion annually to the economy.

As a matter of principle and practice, Canada's airports are strongly committed to providing the highest levels of customer service, including obligations under the *Official Languages Act* to provide a level of service for travellers in either of Canada's official languages.

Airports are very sensitive and responsive to the needs of their passengers. People from all walks of life arrive on a daily basis from every region in Canada and from all over world. Canada's airports are filled with travellers with a multitude of language needs – including a growing number of travellers who speak neither of Canada's official languages.

As international travel as a share of overall travel continues to grow for Canada's airports, we can expect the demand for minority language services will grow as well. Also expected to grow are the needs of our aging population and a growing contingent of travellers with mobility issues.

Canada's airports are committed to serving the needs of all of these travellers to the best of their abilities, and in the most effective way possible. And we believe there is ample evidence that we are doing so successfully.

In fact, excellence in passenger experience is a hallmark of Canada's airports. Each year, our airports score top marks on international customer service rankings from Skytrax and Airport Council International's Airport Service Quality Awards.

ASQ is a global program to recognize the best airports in the world according to passenger satisfaction surveys. Numerous Canadian airports come out on top year after year in North American and world rankings.

We have discussed the many customer service accolades our airports have received. Now how about the complaints?

We did an informal survey just last week and from what we are hearing from our members, there are very few complaints by the travelling public concerning the availability of services in French or English. In fact, none of our member airports reported receiving more than a handful of complaints about official language services.

And this is the context in which Canada's airports have reviewed the proposed legislation before you today.

Airports have several concerns about the practicality of some of the measures proposed in bill S-205, which could present significant operational challenges if this bill were to move forward.

First, on the question of equal quality services in S-205, how would "equal quality" of language service be defined, measured and enforced? Would it mean the same thing in different parts of the country? The answer to this is unclear.

Second, do we know the projected implementation cost of an “equal quality” service delivery model? If we don’t, would an in-depth study be conducted to properly assess the impact such a change would have on airport business operations? This would be prudent as the costs could be significant for airports of any size.

Third, what would the consultations process in proposed section 23.1(2) look like? Which members of the community would be consulted to evaluate and monitor service quality? Would the findings of these consultations have an ability to affect airport service delivery, and, if so, to what degree?

Fourth, airport authorities directly control only a small portion of the services and businesses that operate inside the airport. Airports already have taken steps to encourage support of language needs, but airports have limited means with which to enforce this.

Under S-205, what mechanism or recourse would an airport authority use to enforce equal quality service delivery with airport businesses and service providers? Would there be penalties for non-compliance, either to the business in question or to the airport authority itself?

Finally, the proposed expansion of official language service delivery requirements to airports not currently subject to the *Official Languages Act*—as these airports do not meet passenger volume and significant demand tests—raises questions around the availability of human resources.

In employment markets with less than 5% minority language populations, the ability to hire bilingual staff would be an enormous challenge. How would airports be expected to staff positions appropriately when a qualified labour pool may not exist? We understand this to be a challenge even in markets with significant populations of both English and French speakers.

There are many unanswered questions.

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, airport authorities in Canada today are private organizations managing a public asset. We take very seriously our commitment to serve the needs of travellers, including those of travellers with language needs.

However, it also is appropriate to expect that Canada's airports will serve the needs of travellers in the most effective manner possible. These are decisions that the transfer of airports specifically envisioned would be handled not in Ottawa, but at the local level.

Madam Chair, these are some of the thoughts and concerns that I'm pleased to share with you and your honourable colleagues today on behalf of Canada's airports.

In the interest of time, I would like to conclude my remarks and I thank the honourable committee members for their attention.