

Language office eyes probe after Air Canada English-only speech

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Air Canada's new CEO Michael Rousseau giving a speech at the Montreal Chamber of Commerce in Montreal on Nov. 3.

MARIO BEAUREGARD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Michael Rousseau's first speech to business leaders in Montreal was supposed to be his coming out party, a chance for Air Canada

[AC-T \(/investing/markets/stocks/AC-T/\)](#) -1.15% ▼ new chief executive to build credibility and tell the story of an airline – a pillar of the Quebec economy – in recovery mode. Instead, the CEO's English-only talk, during which he revealed that he's not comfortable speaking in

French even after living in the city for more than a decade, has become a public relations nightmare for his employer.

Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages, Raymond Th  berge, said in an interview on Friday that his office has received about 1,000 complaints about the speech and is now weighing whether to launch an investigation. He said his office warned the company days in advance to rethink the CEO's plan to communicate in English.

"The depth of the reaction shows to what point he's touched a very sensitive nerve with the francophone public," Mr. Th  berge said. "It's very much a leadership issue."

Federal politicians piling on Air Canada CEO; NDP calls for Rousseau's resignation

Mr. Rousseau's admission has also become a political problem for Air Canada, which is federally regulated. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Quebec politicians from across the political spectrum have criticized the airline publicly.

In his speech Wednesday to the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, Mr. Rousseau made a few words of introduction in French before switching to English. While answering questions from reporters after the event, he was asked in French: "How does one live in Montreal for more than 14 years speaking very approximative French?" His answer, in English: "Could you redo that in English?"

Mr. Rousseau then said he would love to be able to speak French but that his current priority was Air Canada's recovery amid the COVID-19 crisis. He said: "I've been able to live in Montreal without speaking French. And I think that's a testament to the city of Montreal."

As criticism against him grew more intense in the hours that followed the speech, Mr. Rousseau issued a statement Thursday in which he apologized and pledged to learn French. He said he did not mean to show disrespect for Quebecers and francophones across Canada with his previous comments.

The mea culpa has failed to put a lid on the controversy, and criticism of Mr. Rousseau has continued since. A long-time executive at Air Canada, he took over as CEO from Calin Rovinescu this past February. He had long been seen as the heir apparent.

Mr. Trudeau, who struck a pandemic rescue pact with Air Canada earlier this year that saw the federal government take an equity stake in the airline in exchange for giving the company access to \$5.9-billion, weighed in on Friday. He called Mr. Rousseau's comments "an unacceptable situation" and said the minister in charge of official languages is looking into the matter.

Other political leaders sharpened their criticism against the airline and its CEO, even after his apology. The Quebec New Democratic Party called for Mr. Rousseau's resignation. The party's leader, Alexandre Boulerice, said the CEO was "spitting in the face of Quebecers."

The controversy began Monday with a report in Montreal's Journal de Montréal tabloid that Mr. Rousseau's speech would be in English only. That fact was stated openly in the chamber's invitation to the event on its website.

An official from Mr. Théberge's office phoned Air Canada before the speech, emphasizing the importance of communicating in both official languages. An official in the office of Quebec Premier François Legault made a similar call to the airline's senior leadership, anticipating the resulting outcry, Radio-Canada reported.

Air Canada rejected the warnings on the grounds that the speech was being made at a private event and did not constitute official communication from the airline, the broadcaster said, citing Mr. Théberge. The company did not respond to questions from The Globe and Mail on Friday.

As a federally regulated corporation, Air Canada is subject to Canada's Official Languages Act, which means it has to communicate and deliver services to the public in both English and French. There is no obligation in the act for Air Canada's CEO to be able to speak French.

The question now is whether Mr. Rousseau's speech constitutes a communication with the public. If the Commissioner of Official Languages finds Air Canada at fault, his enforcement options are limited: he only has the power to make recommendations for change to the airline.

The federal government had previously been working on an update to the Official Languages Act that would include strengthening the commissioner's enforcement powers.

Following this incident, Quebec has called on Ottawa to make sure any overhaul includes a closer watch on Air Canada.

Air Canada's board of directors as a whole is responsible for appointing the CEO, according to the board's charter. A description of the CEO position on the company's website, dating from November, 2006, makes no mention of knowing French as a condition of employment.

John Gradek, a former Air Canada manager who teaches aviation leadership at McGill University, said the airline's board members now have to answer for Mr. Rousseau's comments and whether they understood the implications of hiring a non-French-speaking CEO. He said Ottawa can "exert some muscle" as a shareholder if the government feels this is an unsalvageable situation.

François Dauphin, chief executive of Montreal's Institute for Governance of Private and Public Organizations, said Mr. Rousseau had been "very clumsy" in his role as the public-facing guardian of Air Canada's culture, which includes bilingualism. But he said the board also failed to coach the CEO in the importance of bilingualism to the wider community.

"The law is one thing, but there's also common sense. And I think that's what was lacking here," said Jacques Roy, a transportation specialist at Montreal's HEC business school. "If I was in the shoes of other federally regulated companies, like the banks, I'd be asking if the same thing is going to happen to us."

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