

*Official Languages*

since we began our session in September. The spokesman for the New Democratic party said we have not given priority to economic matters. Less than a month ago we were dealing with the bill concerning regional economic expansion. This was one of the major planks of our platform, and the program will do a great deal to help people in Quebec and other parts of Canada who are economically depressed. Therefore, it is incorrect to put forward the argument that this party is trying to push pet projects and give them higher priority than other matters. To say there are priorities greater than those which give our people national and political rights is, I think, to mislead the people.

The people in St. Leonard are very hard pressed, economically, but they are doing their utmost to establish the schools they need. They are doing this because they believe they are right. To say that economic matters always come before other things such as language and culture is, I think, to misread history. How can anybody tell the people in Biafra that they should be reasonable, and economics are more important than their culture, language rights, and so on? If we consider the national problems of many countries we will see that people have felt so strongly about such things as language, culture, religion, and so on, that they have been willing to fight for them despite the economic losses they might suffer.

As the minister said this morning, many people in this country have been waiting 100 years for justice in respect of language and cultural rights. It is about time we did something about this. I enter this debate as an English speaking person from the province of Quebec. I sympathize fully with the English speaking and French speaking people of Canada who have been denied their rights. I refer again to St. Léonard. Many people might say that this example of injustice to the English speaking people is a minor one compared with the injustices perpetrated upon French speaking people during the last 100 years. They are right; there are many examples of greater injustices being perpetrated on the French speaking people of this country.

• (3:30 p.m.)

But I do not think we can take the attitude that because the St. Léonard situation is less of an injustice, we must tolerate it. I think it is time that we in this country acted, not only through the federal parliament but also through the provincial legislatures, to correct

[Mr. Allmand.]

all these injustices. We should act to turn back the clock of history and try to put right the wrongs done in Quebec and in other provinces, especially in other provinces vis-à-vis the French speaking Canadians.

Some people might say—and this point has not been raised once in this debate—that they are becoming a little impatient with the French speaking nationalist movement in Quebec. One is beginning to hear some English speaking people in this country say “let Quebec go. We have had enough. Let them do what they want, we will do what we want”. That is a very inward looking and unreasonable position.

To begin with, people who talk that way do not realize what Quebec is and they do not realize the value of knowing two languages. I myself have had the good fortune of having lived in four provinces. I went to school in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Quebec. When I completed my schooling in Quebec I was behind my colleagues in school in my knowledge of the French language. When I graduated in law I could barely read French and could not speak it at all. However, I realized that if I were to earn my living as a lawyer in Quebec I would have to learn the language of the province, and I did, although with great difficulty. I am far from perfect or fluent in French now, but I can communicate in that language quite well. It was a difficult task. Now, I feel a much richer person because I have acquired the ability to understand and to communicate to a certain extent in another language which is, I would say without a doubt, one of the major languages of the world.

We are lucky to have as our two official languages two languages that are spoken so widely throughout the world. Recently when we went to Belgium with the Standing Committee on External Affairs we came into contact with Flemish and French speaking Belgians. One of the difficulties there is that one of the languages, the French language, is spoken widely throughout the world but the use of the Flemish language is very restricted. It was difficult to convince some French speaking Belgians that they should learn Flemish. However, I cannot understand why Canadians would not quickly reach out for the opportunity to acquire these two very important languages, the use of both of which is world wide.

Now, I want to make it clear that this bill does not seek to impose the French or the English language on anyone in Canada. This