

Borrowing Authority

Just last September, the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) stated, in an address on literacy in Toronto, and I quote: "The urgency of the literacy issue is compelling in both social and economic terms. With one Canadian in four functionally illiterate, we run the risk of two societies, composed of those who can read and those who cannot. We will not have two Canada's in the socio-economic sense any more than in the constitutional sense. We want one Canada, united, prosperous, with equal opportunities for all our citizens".

Wonderful words, but it is quite clear that this promise belongs on the shelf with all the rest of the Government's broken promises. The Prime Minister also stated that the problem of illiteracy is costing Canadians \$10 billion per year. As I mentioned earlier, this Government is providing \$22 million per year.

Many believe that illiteracy is an imported problem, that immigrants to Canada unnecessarily boost this number. Nothing could be further from the truth. Some 78 per cent of the functionally illiterate in Canada were born right here in Canada.

The problem of illiteracy is linked uncategorically to the greatest indignity of all: poverty. Sixty per cent of Canada's functionally illiterate are unemployed. In this vicious circle, the unemployed illiterate population are not looking for jobs. They are not looking because they cannot find jobs. When they do find jobs, they cannot keep them.

Where does one look for a job when he or she cannot read the want ads, cannot read the classified and cannot even read the yellow pages? What purpose do employment centres serve for the functionally illiterate when they cannot read any instructions?

Imagine, Madam Speaker, the humiliation of having to tell a prospective employer that you are unable to fill out even a simple application for employment. Imagine the embarrassment of being unable to submit an application for a social insurance number.

Aside from the humiliation and suffering which illiteracy causes individuals, it also entails overwhelming costs for society. In financial terms, the over-all effect of illiteracy on the economy is staggering.

The Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy has estimated that the problem costs upward of \$4 billion annually to the business community. These costs include \$1.6 billion for industrial accidents. These are accidents which could and should be avoided were it not for the inability to read warning signs printed on machinery.

The social costs of illiteracy are equally staggering. In economic terms the costs include higher unemployment, lack of trainability and higher social assistance payments.

As well, there are the non-economic effects of illiteracy on society. We are aware that within the international arena, literacy is one of the variables used to measure the rate of a nation's development. What statement is made when Canada has such a horrendously high rate of illiteracy?

Clearly, this is a massive problem. It is a condition which is continually spreading. It costs the business community billions of dollars each year, chips away at Canada's reputation, adds costs to Canada's ever increasing assistance programs and, most of all, belittles and humiliates individuals in this great land. When one really looks at the situation objectively one sees that Canada's sparkle is fading quite rapidly.

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Thus, we must do more to combat the problem of illiteracy. We must take a bold new initiative, an offensive against this indignity. In September, 1988, the Government launched what appeared to be such an offensive. Today, less than 12 months later, we are able to see exactly how inadequate those measures have been. Today, we are able to recognize exactly how insincere the Government has been.

A \$110 million program was announced at that time. We soon realized that this amount was to be invested over five years, thus, \$22 million per year. In comparison to the National Capital Commission's lawn-watering annual budget of \$105 million, the amount becomes much less impressive.

In terms of dollars and cents—since that is the only language this Government seems to understand—it is fiscally irresponsible to vote \$22 million toward a problem which extracts \$4 billion to \$10 billion from the economy. More important, it is hypocritical and deceiving of the Government to profess a sincere interest in this issue and contribute what equals only \$5 per illiterate Canadian over five years.