

Official Languages Act

The question of official languages needs more than political will, as history shows us. It also requires that dynamic administrative measures be put in place to ensure that the political will is translated into action. Nevertheless, a strong political will is essential, because it must be there to generate the dynamism, to inspire the renewal. It was in that spirit that in 1979 a political will created the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Official Languages.

Since 1979, the Joint Committee has met many times to consider both the Act and the regulations, and to oversee the implementation of the Act and report on it to Parliament at regular intervals. That is what we have done.

The Committee has tabled a number of reports, and they have been taken seriously by this assembly and by the various governments. I am happy to say that I have been a member of the Committee since it was created, and I even chaired it for several years with Senator Lowell Murray, whom everyone knows, and who is, I should add, a Minister in the present Government. We worked hard and I want to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate all those who collaborated and worked with us, not only the MPs and Senators but also the research staff and the Clerks in particular.

Mr. Speaker, it was political will to change and revitalize that also led to the creation in 1982 of a Special Committee of Deputy Ministers and experts. The Prime Minister at that time, the Right Honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau, after reading the Joint Committee's reports and realizing that the Official Languages Act had to be updated and made to reflect the new Charter of Rights passed by Parliament in 1982, decided to create a Special Committee of Deputy Ministers and experts in this field, who toiled away under the aegis of the Privy Council on the task of renewing, strengthening and updating the Act. They studied the issue for some years, and when the present Government came to power in 1984, they had a thoroughly well-documented file that only needed to be recast as a piece of legislation. This the Government has done, and I congratulate it.

So there we had the political will, and by a joint effort of various committees and other people who took a hand, Bill C-72 was born. Bill C-72 thus follows up the Accord, the constitutional commitment, and acknowledges the formal commitments of the Meech Lake Constitutional Accord. It goes a little further than the Accord, because we were able to get the word "promotion" into the text, the wording of the Bill, which as you know we were, alas, not able to do in the case of the Accord.

Bill C-72 is thus in the same vein as the constitutional commitments. It defines federal objectives within the framework of a revitalized and modernized Act. It seems to us—to us Liberals, at any rate—that it was imperative to give the Bill (which was tabled in the House on June 25, 1987) prompt and serious consideration.

We had been waiting for the Bill for a long time, since it had been announced in two Throne Speeches, but the Government dawdled, the Bill didn't appear. I was obliged to raise the matter in the House on 27 separate occasions, in an attempt to encourage, to stir up interest—I may have overdone it a little, sometimes, but my goal was always to get the Government to take action, to keep its promises and bring a Bill before the House.

Finally, as I said, the Bill saw the light of day. It took nine months, and in February of this year, after a very long delay, we got to second reading. We drew the media's attention to the Bill and then things began to get interesting, because then people began to realize that this Bill was a significant Bill, which went much further than the 1969 Act.

Bill C-72 was supported by three Ministers, the Minister for the Treasury Board, the Minister of Justice, and the former Secretary of State, who gave a press conference where no words got minced. It was a fantastic moment, June 25, to see the government so enthusiastic. But it didn't last long. We had to keep up the pressure and encourage a hesitant government. We wondered why. And then we found out: there was a war going on. There was a war going on between certain Conservative Members. There was a group of about 30 of them, the dinosaur club I called them, which some people didn't like, but I thought it was an appropriate name.

They were carrying on an internal guerilla war against the Bill, in an effort to make people believe there was a crisis in the country. Well, there wasn't any crisis. Not a hint of one. And when my Leader, the Right Honourable John Turner, spoke on February 8, 1988, he said,

• (1210)

[English]

"The time is right, the subject is right, the content is right. In other words, why do we have to wait for a crisis, Mr. Speaker, let us act now".

[Translation]

And he was right. There was no crisis. There were some people trying to create one. The Government had to be encouraged to resist the preposterous pressure being put on it by some of its own MPs.

In committee, finally, after three days of debate in the House, there was a succession of MPs playing at musical chairs. That went on for three months. They replaced one another almost like clockwork, the Tories, one saying his little piece and then the next day another one. We bore with them. One even suggested we hear from 130 witnesses, and 130 witnesses, Mr. Chairman, would have meant the Committee would have had to sit for the whole year, probably, and into next year. We said no. It was time for action. And at the end of three months—and I must say it took patience, you have to be patient in the game of politics—

An Hon. Member: Always!