

[English]

In August 1984 the Prime Minister said before the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped: "A Progressive Conservative government will financially assist under the charter of rights all cases deemed to be of national importance. Cases involving the rights of the handicapped and disabled would certainly fall in this category".

[Translation]

I would like to quote the Prime Minister again. This quotation will be longer, but I think that it will be useful. "We will keep the present Court Challenges Program, which helps individuals and groups seeking to obtain a court decision on contentious points relating to language rights under the Constitution Act, 1867 and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We will consult members of minority groups and other interested persons to ensure that the Court Challenges Program is both well designed and effective". This is from a letter that the Prime Minister wrote to the Federation of Francophones outside Quebec on August 14, 1984, when he was Leader of the Opposition.

I have as many quotes and letters we could want. I know that time is pressing and I cannot read them all. Government members have told Canadians time and time again that they would maintain this program. They said they would. We believed them, but they did not keep their word.

• (1550)

Some of us feel the government has borrowed the agenda of the Reform Party. I can hear members saying: "Come on, Jean-Robert". Now listen to me. The Reform Party has never had time for minorities. It does not believe in multiculturalism. It does not believe in bilingualism. Anyone who abolishes the programs and mechanisms that enable multicultural groups and minority language groups to defend their rights before the courts are wrong. This is not the way Canada was built, and it is not the way we want this country to go on.

*Supply*

I say that by taking a leaf from the Reform Party's program they are out of line with the social and economic realities of our country. We will not let the rights of Canadians be violated. That is why I have asked the government to reinstate the Court Challenges Program immediately.

In the current constitutional context, we are talking about creating collective rights as well as individual rights. We are on the verge of creating a new concept that is neither well known nor easy to interpret: collective rights. What are collective rights? When I talk about self-government for aboriginal people, that is a collective right. When we talk about education rights for minority communities, which may be English in Quebec or French outside Quebec, that is a collective right. Section 23 of the Charter concerns collective rights. It is a difficult concept. Distinct society, whether we like it or not, more or less defines a collective right.

By terminating a program whose purpose was to clarify these new individual rights and possibly clarify these collective rights, the Conservative government is not acting sensibly. I intend to do everything I can, together with my leader, who originated the program. I say this because he was there. He was Minister of Justice when the program was established.

A Liberal government will respect the rights of women, aboriginal people, the disabled, language minorities and other minority groups. As I said, I will work very hard to reinstate a program that will reflect our respect for the many facets of Canadian society. I am making a personal commitment, and I believe I have the support of my entire caucus. I even have a letter I sent yesterday to the Prime Minister, signed by practically all members I was able to contact. I could not get in touch with the member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, because she is in hospital, and a few other members are outside the country, but everyone I approached in my caucus, including the chairman of a standing committee of the House, the member for Oxford, and the NDP critic, signed this letter which quite simply asks the government to extend the Court Challenges Program.