

Voluntary Sector

investigate ways of ensuring the accountability of voluntary organizations. They will be expected to recommend the specific policy tools by which the federal government can directly and indirectly encourage voluntary activity, including tax deductibility and tax incentives.

The government has great faith, Mr. Speaker, in the ability of members of Parliament from all parties to perform this policy formulation and this task effectively. We await their advice and recommendation with great expectation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Lapierre (Shefford): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to this motion on behalf of the official opposition and to assure the House and the Canadian public that we are very much interested in the voluntary sector. Hon. members can appreciate better than anyone else the important role of that sector of our Canadian society since we owe a large number of our seats to the hundreds of volunteers who work for us every election time.

• (1550)

The government initiative aimed at creating a special committee to inquire into means to strengthen the role of the voluntary sector in Canadian society may, at first glance, seem worthy and inspired by the highest and noblest motives. Still, some doubts persist in my mind as to what really motivated this initiative. Several observers claim that the proliferation of committees is a Conservative strategy aimed at appeasing the frustrations of the backbenchers who were appointed neither members of the cabinet nor parliamentary secretaries.

Others suggest that the government wants to keep the opposition busy to prevent hon. members from dealing with political organization. Finally, old hands are convinced that this is a neat way for the Progressive Conservative government to defer important decisions. As long as the committee is considering the issue, the government will not have to make a decision.

Be that as it may, I do not think that the government would stoop that low and use the voluntary sector of this country as a tool of political strategy. I cannot believe that this government would compel members of this House to devote their time and energy to a vile and futile exercise. I do not think either that public funds would be earmarked merely to restore peace within the Progressive Conservative caucus.

This is why, Mr. Speaker, in the interest of the voluntary sector in Canada, we are giving the benefit of the doubt to the government and are willing to take part in that special committee. We deeply regret that by appointing this committee the Secretary of State is delaying the implementation of 81 recommendations drawn to his attention in the report of the Advisory Board of People of Action, which is also called the Andreychuck report. I think the Secretary of State now has it

[Mrs. Stratas.]

and, through that exercise, he will unduly defer the implementation of those recommendations.

The 15 members of that board spent over two years studying all aspects of voluntary work in Canada, and seven parliamentarians are now asked to do the same work in six months. We must admit that it is a huge task and that some doubts remain in our minds. However, as I said, we will take an active part in the proceedings of the committee hoping that it will be a pause for reflection before taking strong and positive measures.

The Canadian people have doubts when they are told about new study groups, they are fed up because we are forever studying. They want action and, as strange as it may seem, after having elected a party which promised them some action, once in power we have never seen such a number of study groups, special committees, missions and consultants, and recently we have heard a lot about them. It is almost as if they have actually elected a government of students.

Coming back to the essence of the motion for debate today, it is imperative that everyone should acknowledge the fundamental value of voluntary work within Canadian society. Respect for this type of action must presuppose respect for the freedom, the integrity and the independence of members of the voluntary sector, no matter what they stand for, what they believe in or what they are doing. Parliamentarians who will deal with this issue will have to display this type of open mindedness and I would even dare say liberal spirit which alone can ensure the success of such a study.

In order to get a better perspective of voluntary work, we must look beyond the limits of federal involvement and study the treatment it gets from provincial and municipal governments as well as from school boards. Voluntary workers, for the most part, are not specialists in constitutional law and do not want to become bones of contention between levels of jurisdiction. The people who want to get involved in voluntary work should not find their activities curtailed by political bickerings. It is up to us to create a sound and open climate for everyone. The advisory board warned us not to take voluntary work for granted and I am personally convinced that these political conflicts can undermine this whole sector.

This whole situation will have to be studied and recommendations made to overcome these problems which may be insurmountable for the layman. The private sector and the media also have a role to play in strengthening the role of the voluntary sector in our society. The committee will have to find the present flaws and propose realistic ways for the voluntary sector to have access to the media and especially the private sector which, because of its capacities, can do much to help us achieve our common objectives.

We must not be afraid of going to existing organizations and sharing their experiences concerning the demobilization of their workers and their causes. We must also get the general public's perception of the role of these organizations, since the public is more and more leery of frauds as far as their