

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Questions or comments? Resuming debate. The hon. member has the floor.

Ms. Nicole Roy-Arcelin (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Communications): Madam Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to speak today to the bill on the status of the artist, because I am convinced Canadian artists have a fundamental role to play in expressing the personality of our country.

Here and abroad, it is our artists who have given eloquent expression to our collective identity and the distinctiveness of our regions. However, despite their success, those same artists are often forced to live in economic circumstances that are marginal, compared with those of their fellow citizens.

In 1951, the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences said in its report that: "One measure of the degree of civilization attained by a nation might fairly be the extent to which the nation's creative artists are supported, encouraged and esteemed by the nation as a whole." The time has come to recognize the tremendous contribution made by Canadian artists and to improve their working conditions.

The status of the artists bill is the final stage in a long process of careful reflection. I would like to recall, for the benefit of all members, some important milestones in that process.

The Massey-Lévesque report stated in 1951 that most artists in this country could not make "even a modestly comfortable living" and was concerned about the paucity of cultural assets in this country.

In 1982, the conclusions of the report of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee were scarcely more optimistic. The report stated that although the contribution made by artists had increased steadily in the past 30 years, their working conditions had remained practically unchanged. The committee said that artists could be defined as poor, highly specialized workers.

The Siren-Gélinas task force created by the Government of Canada in 1986 felt it was both remarkable and unfair that Canadian artists had been able to gain national and international recognition while remaining well below the poverty line.

The task force recommended creating a Canadian Advisory Committee on the Status of the Artist, with a mandate to survey the needs and aspirations of the arts community and advise the government on all matters, issues and policies affecting the status of the artist.

What is the status of the artist in Canada? A study ordered by the federal Department of Communications found that the average professional artist was about 44 years old, in most cases self-employed. He had 17 years of experience in his particular discipline. He spent from 35 to 45 hours a week practising his art, while another 10 to 15 hours was spent doing other work in order to survive.

The average annual income of artists in Canada is \$15,000, which is not a lot compared to that of an assembly line worker in the automotive industry, \$27,500, or a high school teacher, \$36,000.

I would add that artists' income is most often variable and intermittent and that they are not entitled to the benefits most Canadian workers enjoy, in particular unemployment insurance, disability insurance and retirement plans.

Therefore, we may wonder whether the working conditions of Canadian artists are as good as they can be and, that being so, we may be concerned for the new generation of artists whose often bold, experimental and provocative production is necessary for cultural renewal. It is not surprising that more than half of the creators consider their work a vocation rather than a business or a profession.

To do so, it will create the Canadian Artists and Producers Professional Relations Tribunal whose purpose will be to accredit self-employed professional artists' associations so that they can negotiate and enforce labour contracts that set minimum pay and working conditions for their members, without risk of prosecution under the Competition Act.

The bill will also set up the Canadian Council on the Status of the Artist. Its mandate will be to inform and advise the Minister of Communications regularly on any matter concerning the status of artists and it will succeed the Canadian Advisory Committee on the Status of the Artist. The experience of this committee was conclusive. The Government of Canada benefited from its contribution in its last three years of existence.