

Official Languages Act supremacy over any other piece of legislation so that it would have the status of a linguistic charter.

If the Official Languages Act contains a provision which allows Parliament to make exceptions, this also provides some flexibility and thus establishes a linguistic charter, which is essential in my opinion.

The principle contained in Bill C-203 has already been approved by the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Official Languages. Hon. Members will recall that this Committee was asked to examine Bill C-214 introduced during the previous Parliament, whose purpose was the same as that of the bill now before us. It made a recommendation to that effect, even though the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms enshrines this in almost similar terms, in its Section 16 that is well known to us all. It is the same wording, the same principle. The Official Languages act, as pointed out by a witness in Committee, and I quote:

—can cover fields that are not directly provided for in Section 16 of the Charter of Rights.

To illustrate, Mr. Speaker, let me add that the coming into force in 1982 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has not done away with the relevancy of the Canadian Bill of Rights. On the contrary, it will be remembered that the Canadian Bill of Rights Act was enacted in 1960 and that we also passed in 1977 the Canadian Human Rights Act.

That has not changed anything, those Acts are still in the books and they do not conflict with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Official Languages Act, especially Section 2, therefore remains a necessary element to the promotion of linguistic equality in federal institutions in this country. Bill C-203 proposes to give precedence to that principle, while providing Parliament with a notwithstanding clause. Briefly, such is the extent of the measure submitted to this House.

In a non-partisan spirit, Mr. Speaker, let us now look at the political aspect.

In the Throne Speech, the Government stated on November 5, 1984, and I quote:

My government is committed to ensuring that the equality of the two official languages—so vital to our national character and identity—is respected in fact as it is in law. My Ministers acknowledge the need for ongoing improvements and for vigilance in this indispensable area of our national life.

This is a goal I endorse wholeheartedly, Mr. Speaker, but we are forced to conclude that the Government is not very specific with respect to its legislative intentions. It is my view that if this Parliament were to give all the attention needed to Bill C-203 I am introducing today, a major step would be made in respect of the linguistic reform started in 1969.

Since 1969, the linguistic reform has made undeniable progress. Within the three political parties in this House, there is at the official level at least a wide consensus on the principle of linguistic equality and its implementation. As evidence you have the two resolutions passed by this House during the previous Parliament at the time of the linguistic crisis in

Manitoba and the three-party consensus which marked the proceedings in the Special Joint Committee on Official Languages, to which I referred earlier and of which I was a co-chairman.

You will also remember, Mr. Speaker, the wide consensus which prevailed when the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was adopted, which as we know included important linguistic provisions. The fact remains, however, that the Official Languages Act is somewhat outdated. In many respects, it does not reflect the progress made in the linguistic reform process it had launched and which, in the view of some people, it is not hindering. I am thinking especially of the whole question of language in the work place within the Public Service of Canada. Linguistic equality having been enshrined at the highest level in the Constitutional Act of 1982, consistency now requires that we do more, that we give the Official Languages Act the status it deserves. In so doing, this Parliament will clearly indicate to the Canadian people its determination to actualize the principle of linguistic equality.

Language tensions are still a political fact of life in Canada, Mr. Speaker. Recent events in New Brunswick and Manitoba show that the road to linguistic equality is not an easy one. French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians need reassurance from the federal legislators that, despite the pitfalls, there is unswerving determination at the national level to attain linguistic equality. This is the least we can do, Mr. Speaker, and I conclude my remarks on Bill C-203 by expressing the hope that I will get the support of Hon. Members, in order that the motion on this legislation may carry today.

In past years, Mr. Speaker, one or our colleagues would suggest that the Bill be deferred to a committee for consideration. I think that such an issue could be covered in a resolution by a member of this House. I would greatly appreciate it if this very important and extremely relevant question could be thoroughly dealt with by the joint Committees on Official Languages Policy and Programs chaired by a government member. I think that the committee should meet and thoroughly examine the proposal so that one day true linguistic equality will be achieved in this country.

• (1720)

Mr. Doug Lewis (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, I should like to warn the House that I will make my first comments in French.

[*English*]

I thought it was only fair to warn you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity to put into perspective the bill under consideration. It contains an amendment to the legislation on official languages that would give it precedence over all other federal laws, orders, rules and regulations, past as well as present.

I am sure that Hon. Members understand the vital importance of that proposal which has numerous present and future consequences. It is therefore crucial that the underlying princi-