

Government Orders

actually quite surprised that they would make such a big change in their position in such a short time.

I want to state briefly the purpose of this institute. What is this institute supposed to do for heritage languages? Well, it is supposed to promote and develop the field of heritage language learning in Canada. It is to undertake public education, and develop and disseminate Canadian oriented learning materials, assist in the development of programs to improve standards of heritage language instruction, and carry out research activities of importance to heritage language learning in general.

The institute will be established in Edmonton and will work closely with organizations, individuals, and groups from across the country, consulting with community-based organizations, educational institutions, and the provincial and territorial governments to ensure that all those who are concerned with heritage language training benefit from the activities of the institute.

This will be a charitable foundation as well as being supported by the Government of Canada. It will receive financial support from the private sector. We hope that everyone involved will be very much into making this institute the tremendous place that we think it is going to be in order to have the heritage languages expanded.

I understand what the member for Western Arctic is saying concerning Bill C-269. I wish we were debating Bill C-269 right now, but we are not. However, I think it would be very valuable to have the merits of Bill C-269 debated but unfortunately that is not what is before us today. What is before us is whether we are actually going to bar somebody from being part of the heritage language institute.

The bill states that heritage language will mean language other than the official languages that contribute to the linguistic heritage of Canada. Therefore, we do not want to exclude anybody. It does not necessarily include everybody. We have not named all the languages, but it is open-ended. If groups want to come to get research material, there will be an opportunity to do it.

Madam Speaker, I believe that the way the bill as amended in committee now stands before the House is the appropriate definition of heritage language.

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops): Madam Speaker, I feel privileged to participate in today's debate on an act to establish a Canadian Heritage Languages Institute and particularly to follow the very thoughtful amendment of my hon. colleague from Vancouver East which suggests that we amend the bill by saying "Canada and does not include aboriginal languages of Canada".

I really want to associate myself with the comments made by my hon. colleague from Vancouver East as well as my colleagues from Comox—Alberni and Spadina on this issue because it seems to be totally inappropriate that we would not include those languages of our first citizens in with heritage languages generally.

To make my point, I want to quote from Mr. Phil Fontaine, the provincial leader of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, who on July 14 of this year said the following: "We, the original people of this country have inherited through the oral traditions of our forefathers 55 distinct original languages. Fifty-two of these original languages of Canada are now on the brink of extinction. Unlike you," meaning the non-aboriginal peoples of the country, "we cannot retrieve these languages from our mother country. Our mother country is Canada. What we lose in Canada we lose forever."

I think that we really have to reflect seriously on what appeared at least in the beginning to be the government's motivation to include with Italian, Norwegian, Danish and German, 53 aboriginal languages to be considered heritage languages.

Regardless of what we might do to our national heritage in terms of language, myself being Norwegian, we can always go back home and learn the language, or be introduced again to it.

• (1250)

We cannot do that with aboriginal languages. This is their home. This is the only place in the world where they exist. I feel particularly strongly about representation. A group of us, members of Parliament from the interior of British Columbia, met recently in the great city of Vernon. At that meeting we were privileged to welcome four of the native chiefs of our region. They explained their concern about their language. This is the Shuswap language, Madam Speaker, a name that you are