

Supply

• (1525)

I emphasize this is not just a minority language right. Whether they are part of the English speaking majority outside of Quebec, the French speaking majority within Quebec, the French speaking communities outside Quebec, or the English speaking communities within Quebec, all Canadians have these entitlements. These basic rights are reflected in the corresponding institutional obligations set out in the Official Languages Act and the regulations on services to the public.

[Translation]

The new act and its regulations respecting services to the public take an office-by-office approach which is both consistent with the requirements of the Constitution and more flexible and effective, the aim being to ensure the provision of services in both languages where numbers warrant.

[English]

The motion to amend the Official Languages Act would limit the circumstances where federal services should be available to official language minorities in their own language to situations where there is a demonstrable local demand. The act's criteria and the regulations thereunder are already largely directed to meeting local needs, although the burden is not placed on minority members of the public to demonstrate demand.

A significant concentration of the minority language population in terms of numbers and proportion is sufficient in most circumstances to warrant the provision of federal services under the act in both languages. It avoids the administrative costs of actually having to measure demand at each office. This also helps to put to rest a longstanding difficulty in living up to the promise of the act. In the past demand from minority communities was often stifled because there were no bilingual services and there were no bilingual services because there was little manifested demand.

This brings me to comment on that portion of the opposition motion that would amend the act to reflect the philosophy of territorial bilingualism. If this notion of territorial bilingualism is meant to reflect the predominance of French in Quebec and English elsewhere, then I would respectfully reply that the act already reflects this predominance to an appropriate degree.

If however what is sought is territorial unilingualism whereby English and French are not only the predominant but the exclusive languages for all intents and purposes, I would have to say this would contravene not only the basic principles upon which the act was built but also the Canadian reality.

[Translation]

I have already said that with respect to federal services made available to members of the public, the principle of bilingual services was not absolute and that availability varied according to demographic and other factors. With respect to internal services made available to federal employees and the language in which public servants perform their job, under section 16 of the Charter, the two official languages are guaranteed equality of status "as to their use" in federal institutions. This great principle of equality is reflected in the duties and functions of federal institutions set out in Part V of the act.

In the National Capital Region and in certain designated regions, particularly in the Montreal area and in New Brunswick, federal institutions must ensure that their work environments are conducive to the use of both official languages.

[English]

Outside the prescribed regions the duty of federal institutions is essentially one of preserving fair practices as respects the minority language.

In conclusion, I respectfully submit that the Official Languages Act is a worthy and reliable instrument for the protection and the advancement of Canada's linguistic duality. Amendments that go to the principles of the legislation and which may impinge upon its constitutional underpinnings would serve no useful purpose and would likely deflect our energies from the real issues of the day.

The administration of the Official Languages Act is required by the legislation to be reviewed on a permanent and ongoing basis by a committee of Parliament. It is at that level we should be working to ensure that the implementation of the principles of the act is in accordance with the best practices.

I therefore encourage the House not to support this motion. I thank hon. members for their attention.

• (1530)

Mr. Bob Ringma (Nanaimo—Cowichan): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the Minister of Justice would agree that the current Official Languages Act plus the Charter of Rights and Freedoms adequately protect the rights of all minority language groups in the country. If so, how is it that we have the situation still en route in Quebec in which Bill 22, Bill 101 and Bill 178 together combine to make for injustice, which the United Nations has ruled on, against the country and against the province of Quebec? We still have not solved this problem with the existing legislation.

Mr. Rock: Mr. Speaker, in defence of the statute in its present form I referred to the compromise, social and political, out of which the statute arose. I think that in this country, with respect to this act as with so much else, what is required is a constant