

There is no question that the Constitution is an important document. It has been subjected to intensive debate throughout the nation and the government was listening. My colleague, the Minister of Justice, emphasized this when, in January, he tabled amendments for the Charter of Rights. He said:

"I have studied with great care both the written briefs and the oral testimony...and I have taken into account the points which have been made by all members of this committee (Special Joint Committee of the House of Commons and Senate). The government has listened to the views of Canadians."

With those words, he tabled a number of significant amendments which were subsequently adopted.

The Constitution and Charter of Rights, what does it do? It protects fundamental freedoms common to all Canadians - such as freedom of speech, of religion, of the press, and the freedom to vote and to hold office.

These are for all Canadians, not one minority here or there, but for all minorities. They are not insignificant.

The Charter guarantees the freedom of Canadians to establish residence and seek employment anywhere in Canada, without regard to provincial borders. It also recognizes the need for special measures to be taken to protect local residents in provinces whose rate of employment is below the national average. A minority group of another sort, and one not normally thought of in terms of minority rights.

Legal rights of Canadians are guaranteed by the Charter. It is comforting to think that the majority of Canadians rarely are on the wrong side of the law, but it is equally comforting to know one's personal rights are well protected through the Constitution and not subject to legislative vagaries or local custom. Protection from arbitrary arrest and against unreasonable search and seizures are essential elements of the Charter, as is the enumeration of the rights of an accused to be defended by counsel, to have a fair trial and not to be forced to testify against oneself.

Of no little importance to our audience tonight are the measures to ensure the equality of women before and under the law.