

*Constitution Amendment, 1987*

I will try to explain in my speech some of the reasons that led me to take this position. The honorary president of the Canadian Human Rights Foundation, Professor John Humphrey, gave me the following definition of a charter of rights: "A charter of rights is, or should be, the legal and concrete embodiment of a national consensus on the minimum of rights every man and woman has as a human being, that is, the rights they have because they are human beings and for no other reason. That is why they are called human rights. And since those rights are essential to human dignity, they should be the same for all Canadians, in whatever region of this country they happen to live".

Today, I intend to address language rights which are among those rights that are essential to human dignity. Since 1963, when Mr. Pearson ordered a report on bilingualism, we have been trying in Canada to define the minimum language rights that should prevail across this country.

As far as our official languages, French and English are concerned, we set up a system of linguistic equality. This does not necessarily mean the number of bilingual individuals but concerns our institutions. We defended the right of every citizen to send his children to school in the language of his choice, English or French. We defended the rights of each citizen to communicate with his governments in his own language, and we also defended the rights of each citizen to work in his own language, at least, within the federal government and the governments of provinces that provide services in both official languages.

Mr. Speaker, if at all possible, we wanted these language rights to apply everywhere in Canada, across this country, because Canada belongs not only to those who speak English but also to those who speak French. French-speaking Canadians were not to be restricted to the territory of the province of Quebec. They were the first to settle this country and to make their home here in Canada. And there are sizeable French-speaking communities everywhere in Canada.

On the other hand, English-speaking Canadians have been an integral part of Quebec's society for quite some time. That was the rationale behind the official languages policy, and that was the rationale behind Charter of Rights and Freedoms Sections 16 to 23. Mr. Speaker, we must keep in mind that these linguistic rights are just as essential to human dignity as the other rights defined in the Charter of Rights. Any Canadian should enjoy such rights.

Normally all Canadians and all governments in Canada, including those which do not claim to be bilingual, should acknowledge these responsibilities in the face of the very nature of this country, for not only are our two official languages a source of enrichment for Canada, Mr. Speaker, they are the very essence of this country. That is the unique heritage which makes us different from other countries, and more particularly from the United States now that we are seeking a free trade agreement.

All Canadians therefore have the moral responsibility to promote our two official languages. That being so, Mr. Speaker, the Meech Lake Accord is an abdication, an unbelievable abdication on the part of the Conservative Government with respect to the basic values which Canadians had developed over the years, namely that the French fact is a fundamental element of the heritage of all Canadians. I am saying it is abdication because Canadians did live up to the challenge. They acknowledge that the two official languages are the business of all Canadians and of all their governments. As evidence, the poll taken in 1985 by the Commissioner of Official Languages shows that the great majority of Canadians willingly accept Canada's linguistic duality; for instance, they support the concept of providing services in the language of the minority, and this applies not only to federal services, but also to provincial services and to the private sector. Moreover, the response in the survey was even more favourable for specific services such as post offices, hospitals and department stores.

Mr. Speaker, something which should be especially emphasized is the attitude of young people in the 15 to 24 age group who proportionately are much more in favour than their seniors of linguistic duality in Canada and of providing services in the language of the minority.

It is not only in the surveys that Canadians support linguistic duality. An increasing number of them live it personally by sending their children to a French school.

As incredible as it may seem, during the last school year, nearly 200,000 English-speaking students were enrolled in French immersion courses throughout Canada. This is five times as many as in 1977-78, only nine years ago.

When I said that, with the Meech Lake Accord, this Government goes against reality of Canada, it is because the Government refuses to recognize in the Constitution what Canadians themselves recognize daily in the choices they make. The Meech Lake Accord is a step backward. At the very moment when we are making progress and when attitudes and behaviours are changing radically in Canada, the Government moves backward. It is a shame to see how far apart are the perception Canadians have of their country and the narrow vision those who signed the Meech Lake Accord share. The Accord promotes French in Quebec, and English in the rest of Canada. The Quebec National Assembly and Government will have the role of promoting the distinct society. What will they promote? Its French identity, naturally, as though the Quebec Government did not have the power to do so already. According to the terms of the Accord, the federal Government and the provinces will protect linguistic minorities, but they have not made a commitment to promote these minorities. I want to remind the House that the President of the Federation of Francophones outside Quebec, when he appeared before the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on the Constitution, blamed the Tory Government for its lack of courage and said, I quote: "This Accord is just not good enough to stop the progress of assimilation".