

Illiteracy

jurisdiction. Yes, it is a provincial jurisdiction, and no one wants to change that. But what has to happen is that in the face of a national challenge there has to be a national response. People have to know what it is they want to do.

There are areas in the country simply in terms of finance alone which will not be able to respond. The Hon. Member is quite right. This is a problem in which the federal Government has to provide the dollars. Only the federal coffers have the ability that is needed to respond to the financial needs of mounting an attack on illiteracy and the other problems that I have identified.

I believe that the issue of illiteracy is extremely important. But it is symptomatic of a deeper malaise. This matter has nothing to do with provincial jurisdiction. Provincial jurisdiction remains. I also have to make the distinction that this should not be a federal strategy. I am calling for a national strategy. I think that is exactly what the Hon. Member is doing, too. He has pointed to a number of institutions that have grown up to deal with the problem of illiteracy. He is quite right when he says that we must deal with them. We must deal with the people on the front line. In dealing with them, in providing them with the money, the money will not be enough. What there also has to be is a national strategy.

I commend the Hon. Member on the initiative that he has taken today. I know why he has suggested a parliamentary committee. It is because a private Member cannot call on the Government of Canada for an expenditure of funds. It seems to me if he were not in that position that he would agree with me. We have studied and looked at the problem. In 1988 as we head into a free trade association with the United States which will bring challenges to us, and as we head into competition in the information society among the OECD countries, what we badly need is a national plan for dealing with the real challenge to Canada of education, of which illiteracy is a symptom.

● (1730)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Desjardins (Témiscamingue): Madam Speaker, it is certainly an honour for me to rise in the House and deal with Canada's growing illiteracy problem about which we are all quite concerned. Literacy education is necessary not only to improve people's quality of life, but also to enhance communication and understanding between all Canadians, I wish to commend the Hon. Member for Winnipeg North (Mr. Orlikow) for moving his motion suggesting that a special Committee of the House be established to consider Canada's serious and growing illiteracy problem. Madam Speaker, any Member representing a rural riding such as yours truly understands that illiteracy is a growing problem in Canada. In such regions as Abitibi—Témiscamingue, our elders and pioneers were much too busy working the fields and cutting trees to be concerned about learning to read and write. It is a problem indeed, but over the past few months, this Government has taken concrete steps to remedy the situation. That is why I suggest my Hon. Friend failed to take into account the

efforts made by this Government to raise the level of education in Canada.

The Secretary of State supports community initiatives in the area of literacy education. Moreover, if I may, I should like to emphasize the fact that the Solicitor General has emphasized literacy education in Federal penitentiaries and obtained encouraging results, which for that matter confirms a recent article published on this issue.

Several months ago, the Government invited organizations from all over the country interested in this problem to express their views and make recommendations on the ways to correct the situation. Having thoroughly examined the many fine proposals the Government has received, it was decided for starters to spend \$1 million in literacy education programs. The announcement of this commitment, on September the 8th, coincided with the World Literacy Day. However, Madam Speaker, the Government has done more than commit funding. At the Department of the Secretary of State, we have established a National Literacy Secretariat, responsible for coordinating federal, provincial, territorial and community activities in this field.

The Secretariat is now examining all federal programs to determine how they could respond satisfactorily to the needs of those of our fellow citizens whose ability to read and write is not sufficient for them to take an active part in their daily occupational and social activities. The Government is seriously considering establishing a national literacy council that would advise the Government in this area, and the Department of the Secretary of State has promised to hold a seminar on literacy.

Madam Speaker, without wishing to contradict the Hon. Member, I think it is rather premature to appoint a special committee of the House. The National Literacy Secretariat is now doing extremely productive work in the area of co-operative research. I say co-operative, Madam Speaker, because the Secretariat co-operates very closely with other governments and the agencies concerned, to ensure that the solutions that are approved are practical and down to earth.

Co-operative research is essential, not only to harmonize community, provincial and federal initiatives but also to avoid duplication and the wasting of precious resources. Madam Speaker, my point is that at the present time, a special committee of the House would merely be going over ground that has already been covered. If such a proposal had been made by the provinces and the agencies concerned when the Government announced its intentions on World Literacy Day, I am sure it would have been given serious consideration at the time. However, that was not the case. People working at the community level on this problem estimate that the present approach will make a very effective contribution towards permanently raising the level of literacy in this country. The opinion of these men and women is what counts for us at this time.

Madam Speaker, we realize that illiteracy is not only a personal problem but also a community problem. That is why