

Official Languages

rights in the constitution were presented as the solution to the problem of national unity in Canada. This was patently misleading and was bound to arouse bewilderment and resentment. Language rights have always been and are today an important step toward more meaningful national unity. But the continuing social and economic problems which press on the Canadian people are even more basic and have taken priority in their minds and in their hearts.

The Quebecker looks at the high rate of unemployment in his province, at the low rate of investment, at the inequalities from which he suffers, and his impatience is fed by social and economic insecurity. In this context, I submit that the promotion of bilingualism appears to him to be a gesture rather than a meaningful accomplishment for his life and that of his family. The fact that he may now be able to speak his native tongue in a federal office in Manitoba can hardly move him to gratitude while he is unemployed in Quebec.

Similarly, the western Canadian sees his economy badly damaged by a continuing drop in farm income and he begins to resent the fact that the government and parliament are preoccupied with matters which he may or may not recognize as important but which he knows cannot assist him and his neighbours in their mounting difficulties. Across the country, the failure to deal with regional inequality, with pressing problems like housing, high rents, mounting interest rates and destructive increases in the cost of living, creates an atmosphere in which discussion about language rights seems secondary, if not irrelevant.

Mr. Pepin: How can it be irrelevant?

Mr. Lewis: I said, irrelevant in people's minds. I say, Mr. Speaker, not with partisan satisfaction but with deep regret, that the worsening climate for a better understanding on the issue of bilingualism is due directly to the failure of the Prime Minister and the government to appreciate or, at least, to act as if they appreciated the fundamental social fact that the unity of a people must be grounded in social justice and equality. It cannot be patched up by action in other spheres which are in themselves important but which do not directly attack the anti-social priorities forced on our society by irresponsible corporate power. History has shown again and again that prejudice feeds on poverty and insecurity. And although the people of Canada are blessed compared with

[Mr. Lewis.]

most people of this unhappy world, Canadians rightly resent the avoidable and heavy burdens which millions of them are forced to carry despite our immense riches.

I also say—I am sorry to be so emphatic about this, Mr. Speaker, but I believe this should be said—that even the priorities imposed by the government on this parliament will add to the misunderstanding reappearing in some parts of the country. The other day the Minister of Regional Economic Expansion (Mr. Marchand) spoke in Halifax and underlined the fact that the development of the disadvantaged areas of this country requires an industrial incentive program immediately; but his bill is not before us.

We have had a housing crisis that has mounted in severity. The crisis remains despite the fact that the Prime Minister refuses to recognize it. We have had the resignation of a senior member of the cabinet over the issue. To meet the difficulties created for him by the resignation of the minister, the Prime Minister acted in uncharacteristic haste and himself introduced a housing bill. My colleagues and I do not see in that bill any solution of the most urgent part of the housing problem, but why, one asks, is not even this housing bill dealt with now?

Where lies urgency in the light of the crushing social and economic problems facing our people? Or has this legislative priority been imposed on parliament because the two bills are pet projects of the Prime Minister which he introduced in his former capacity and which served to bring him into public prominence? We therefore have this bill before us immediately following upon a long and sometimes acrimonious debate on the omnibus bill amending the Criminal Code, without legislation to deal with the most crushing matters concerning the people of Canada being interposed. I can only hope that this thoughtless intransigence on the part of the Prime Minister and the government will not do harm to a cause which is important to Canada and in which I believe as deeply as does the Prime Minister himself.

• (2:30 p.m.)

[*Translation*]

However, Mr. Speaker, I admit right away that the matter of bilingualism in Canada remains important and that this bill has to be passed without delay, or prolonged and bitter debate.

We are in favour of this bill because we think that it is fair and necessary and even