

Official Languages Act

Mr. Speaker, it is true that this Bill is the fruit of the labours of many Canadians, under both this Government and previous Governments: civil servants, Commissioners of Official Languages, members of the language communities in this country, who almost always inspire us, give us ideas, and sometimes even push the politicians to act.

[*English*]

The coexistence of our two linguistic communities symbolizes our Canadian distinctiveness, this society of freedom and tolerance, justice and compassion that we all seek to build. The majority of Canadians accept our nation's duality and this brings greater respect for the rights of all other minorities. Two official languages, therefore, far from being divisive, are a guarantee of tolerance and understanding, because an open mind on language cannot but nurture generosity of understanding and support for other cultural and linguistic groups.

We have had here for several years—at least since I have been here, since 1972—a policy of multiculturalism. I have said it before, if people cannot accept two official languages in this country, they can hardly understand and accept the multicultural nature of Canada and the important policies that have been adopted to support and strengthen and promote our cultural diversity.

Here again we are faced with our large geographic expanse, a large territory, and our regional differences and, admittedly, our differing perspectives. I am confident that we in this country, are beginning to see the importance of looking beyond our local and regional boundaries, to look for the differences; not to criticize them, not to destroy them, not to eliminate them, but to support them, to promote them and thus enrich each other and make this a better country for all of us.

It is the Liberal Party's position that this is a good Bill. It is the Liberal Party's position that we will support and defend across this country the principles of this Bill. We pray for understanding across the country and for the Bill's implementation in a generous, open and, hopefully, quick way.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Gauthier: I say that because the regulations that will flow from this Bill will be subject to parliamentary review, in the committee on regulatory review, and it is very important that the Bill be applied in a generous, open manner.

[*Translation*]

We must not be mean about this, we must not be petty, the regulations and the whole application must be generous. Otherwise, Mr. Speaker, it will be a beautiful Charter but it will have neither teeth nor impact.

The problem is quite simple: how do we ensure equality between anglophones and francophones despite their unequal distribution on Canadian territory? That is a question our predecessors in government and our forebears have already tried to answer, beginning with the Fathers of Confederation in 1867. Since then every generation has had to adopt, modernize, modify and let us say reinforce where necessary the laws and regulations regarding official languages, in order to

adapt them to a sociological reality that itself is constantly changing.

In this search for legislative perfection, perhaps impossible to achieve but still a valid goal, there are two dimensions: the national dimension—Canada as a whole; and the regional dimension—our cities and towns, our communities, our regions and provinces. At the national level, legislation and regulations must be brought in that ensure members of the two main language communities equivalent rights, neither more nor less, so that they can feel at home in their country, at least at the institutional level. That is the role that the federal government must try to play, that is the goal of Bill C-72: to create an atmosphere of generosity toward all Canadians who need to deal with federal institutions for service and communication in the language of their choice and not in the language of the institution, which as we know can vary from region to region.

At the regional and local level, what is at stake is not quite the same. Naturally, that equality of rights and privileges that have been granted remains constant no matter what the region. But a new dimension must be added, that of minorities, individuals situated in a cultural and social environment dominated by the other group. Whether it is the anglophones in Quebec among the francophone majority, or the francophones outside Quebec who live among or in surroundings that are largely anglophone, they experience situations that are, if not the same, at least comparable. The result is that at the national level we have to pay particular attention to the unique situations in our cities and towns and in the provinces. We have always done so in the past, and we will continue to do so. It is one of the characteristic things about Canada, and I for one am proud of it.

It was in fact partly because of our geography, and the distribution of our population over so vast a territory, that we opted for a federal system in the first place. It follows that we must endow ourselves with the necessary constitutional provisions that will unite all the different pieces into one mosaic.

• (1200)

That is the origin of the interplay of the national and regional dimensions to which I referred earlier. The broad goals are set at the national level. But each province has specific responsibilities through which the national goals are achieved—health services, education, social services, domestic trade, the administration of justice, the obligation to make rules for the professions and for municipal and regional governments. All those sectors are, according to the Constitution, matters for provincial jurisdiction. In all those sectors, the federal government has no jurisdiction, and in none of them will Bill C-72 have any direct effect. And yet, the provinces have an important role. It is the provinces that will have to establish within their borders the language régime best suited both to national objectives and to the particular needs of their provincial populations. That is why Canada's linguistic mosaic is so diverse.