

Government Orders

[English]

Mr. Bernie Collins (Souris—Moose Mountain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it gives me much pleasure to take part in the debate concerning legislation that will establish in law the Department of Canadian Heritage.

As an opening comment I must say I am astounded by the determined attempts to turn a transactional piece of legislation into a seemingly complicated bill. The legislation before us is simply intended to give legal effect to a department that has been in effect for well over a year.

The Department of Canadian Heritage brings together the various elements that define us as a diverse and vibrant nation with a rich and bounteous cultural and natural heritage. The department's activities range from cultural development to arts, broadcasting, national parks, historic sites, amateur sport and multiculturalism. The department also administers social languages, state ceremonial and native programs, all of which contribute in a significant way to what makes uniquely Canadian.

The mission of the Department of Canadian Heritage which states "building our future together: strengthening a shared sense of Canadian identity which respects the diversity of the land and the people" reflects the broad range of activities that define the Canadian society. Direct support to our cultural industries, protection and preservation of our national parks and historic sites and the promotion of Canadian excellence in sports and culture are just a few examples.

Each and every part of the department is connected in some way to what we could refer to as the spirit and soul of Canada. Together these units form a striking panorama of our past accomplishments, our current reality and our aspirations for the future.

As the chief custodian of natural and physical heritage, Parks Canada commemorates, protects and presents both directly and indirectly places of significance to Canadian cultural and natural heritage as a means of encouraging public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment. The economic activity and tourism, generated by the department's operations make a substantial impact on the growth of many local economies. As well the parks service is setting new trends in its approach to the forging of innovative partnership arrangements with private and not for profit enterprises as a means of carrying out the responsibilities that fall within its mandate.

The Department of Canadian Heritage also plays a key role in the enhancement and development of English and French linguistic minority communities. Respect for Canada's two official languages, for the traditions and contributions of our aboriginal peoples, for our cultural diversity and for basic human rights

makes Canada stand out among other countries as a nation that truly values and appreciates its diversity.

Multiculturalism is essential to Canadian society. Countries throughout the world are trying to find the formula that will allow them to create a real sense of national identity among groups of different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and racial backgrounds. Many of these countries are now taking a serious interest in the 100 per cent Canadian model we have created.

• (1615)

Members will note that in the act creating the Department of Canadian Heritage the government undertakes to advance the equality of all Canadians in their country's social, economic and cultural life. It recognizes the need to eliminate obstacles that divide Canadians and to forge bonds based on confidence and respect. The goal of multiculturalism is after all to create social cohesion and to strengthen national identity.

The Department of Canadian Heritage also focuses its efforts on the enhancement of culture and the development in Canada of a means of communication. Both are crucial to the future of our country not only in maintaining the uniqueness of Canada but also in acting as a powerful instrument of economic development.

No one will argue that we live in challenging times. At this particular juncture in our country's history unfortunately there are forces working to dismantle the entity that is Canada. Within this context it is imperative that government foster an environment in which Canada's rich cultural heritage can flourish and that all Canadians have access to their own products.

Moreover the march of technology is relentless, changing and in many cases erasing traditional borders. We are also witnessing changes which are taking place on a dramatic scale and are affecting the economies of our established trading partners throughout the world.

Within this backdrop and keeping it in mind now more than ever Canadians will benefit from the creation of a department such as Canadian heritage. I believe that the minister of the department has the privilege to direct one of the government's most exciting and challenging portfolios.

The legislation to create the department presents a far sighted and enlightened step by our government. This department will help ensure that Canada remains a country others look to as an example. It is a nation that is confident enough in its identity to embrace peoples of the world not only accepting their cultural differences but welcoming and acknowledging them for what they are: Living examples of human expression that link us to the past and provide us with the foundation and certainty necessary to face the future.

I believe that as a nation we need a Department of Canadian Heritage. I hope that the bill will receive speedy passage.