

Official Languages

Mr. Lewis: Would the minister permit a question? Does this mean that the federal government will be able to make procedural rules with respect to the work of such courts? That is how it seems to me to read.

Mr. Turner (Ottawa-Carleton): Where the federal courts are involved it would be a federal rule; where provincial courts are involved it would be a provincial rule.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Béchard): Order. I regret to interrupt the minister, but his time has expired.

An hon. Member: Let him continue.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Béchard): Does the house give unanimous consent?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Turner (Ottawa-Carleton): I thank the house for its indulgence.

Amendments will also be proposed for the purpose of clarifying a number of other provisions. Included is a provision dealing with the alteration of bilingual districts once established. We wish to make it clear that no alteration can be made unless the altered district would fulfil the criteria established in the legislation for the creation of a bilingual district. I am referring to 13(4). It is also proposed to clarify the powers of investigation of the Commissioner of Official Languages—this is to be found in 26 (1)—and the ambit of the expression “institutions of the Parliament and Government of Canada” so that there may be no doubt that these include the Canadian Forces and the R.C.M.P. I refer now to 36(3).

Finally, an amendment will be proposed which would impose a duty on the Public Service Commission to see that the purposes and provisions of the act are carried out. This is important in the framework of realizing the goals of the bill in terms of the federal public service. I am referring to the new section 40(4). However, this duty will be qualified by the obligation to maintain the principle of the selection of personnel according to merit as required by the Public Service Employment Act.

I have attempted to give hon. members a thumbnail sketch of the package of amendments to be put forward at the committee stage. It will be possible to discuss the details of the government amendments as they are

[*Mr. Turner (Ottawa-Carleton).*]

moved in committee. I believe this bill recognizes that one of the fundamental questions we have to face as Canadians is the question of equality of access to the federal institutions of government. I do not minimize what the leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield) said in his speech on Friday nor what the hon. member for York South (Mr. Lewis) or the hon. member for Témiscamingue (Mr. Caouette) said in the course of their speeches to the effect that economic matters are of great importance. Nevertheless, no one can gainsay the fact that one of the fundamental problems we have to face is whether the French language will continue to exist in Canada or outside of Canada—whether it will be spoken only in Quebec, or in a separate Quebec. This is at the root of our current constitutional debate and it is at the basis of the official languages bill.

This may be difficult for people in some parts of the country to digest. It may be difficult, particularly, in western Canada where there has long been a mosaic of many cultures. To many in Western Canada this bill may appear to be a reversal of history. But to those of us who support it it reflects a fundamental premise that this country as we know it can survive only if we broaden our recognition of the two founding cultures and the two founding languages.

I believe the provisions of this bill have been generally misunderstood, particularly in western Canada. Some people seem to feel that this legislation, if enacted, would oblige or compel the average citizen of Canada, or the average citizen in western Canada, to speak French—that it represents compulsory bilingualism. This is just not the case. I believe that no matter the source from which the criticism may come—and I respect the views held by hon. members—we must deal with the bill in terms of what it really says. The principle of this bill is that there should be equality of access to the federal institutions of government, that every citizen should be able to communicate with the federal government in either of the two languages.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Turner (Ottawa-Carleton): It is not compulsory individual bilingualism; it is institutional bilingualism—equality of access to the federal institutions of government rather than compulsory bilingualism for individuals. People will continue to use the language that they speak now, but within the terms of the bill they will be able to approach the federal government in the language of their choice.