[*Translation*]

AIRPORT TRANSFER (MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS) BILL

THIRD READING—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator Grimard, seconded by the Honourable Senator Lavoie-Roux, for the third reading of Bill C-15, An Act to provide for certain matters respecting official languages, employee's pensions and labour relations in connection with the transfer of certain airports.

And on the motion in amendment of the Honourable Senator Frith, seconded by the Honourable Senator Fairbairn, that clause 4 of the Bill be deleted and replaced by the following:

4. Where the Minister has sold, leased or otherwise transferred an airport to a designated airport authority, on and after the transfer date the Official Languages Act applies to the airport authority, with such modifications as the circumstances require, to the authority in relation to the airport as if

(a) the authority were a federal institution; and

(b) the airport were an office or facility of that institution other than its head or central office.

Hon. Louis-J. Robichaud: Honourable senators, this debate which has been going on for almost three months in committee or in Committee of the Whole is no routine matter. While it deals with certain aspects of Bill C-15 on airport transfers, it brings out a profound conflict between the Official Languages Act, which flows directly from the Constitution and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the way the government privatization and transfer policy is applied. In the name of a policy that may have some merit, the Bill jeopardizes hard-won individual rights. We know what a certain short-sighted conception or rather misconception of the rules of the game in the private sector has cost us in terms of effort, delays and anxiety.

That is what it is all about and nothing less. It is no coincidence that my colleagues, senators Corbin, Molgat and others, have so brilliantly spoken expressing their views with logic, reason, knowledge and with an open heart. It is no . . . It is no coincidence that one of them courageously broke party lines to try to correct what we think is a dangerous injustice. It is no coincidence either that we all represent provinces where Francophones are a minority. And prestigious voices of the English-speaking community have said the same thing for the same reasons, as the proposed amendment tabled by Senator Frith reminds us. All these colleagues know what they are talking about and the government would be well advised to listen to them carefully.

Obviously, there is no place for partisanship here! We appeal to the government's sense of fairness and remind it of the commitment it made in the 1988 Official Languages Act to encourage the development of Francophone and Anglophone minorities. Does Bill C-15 do this or the exact opposite?

[Senator Frith.]

I will be brief, because my colleagues have already covered much of the ground, but it would be hard for me not to challenge certain arguments against the full application of the Act which were presented to us as being obvious but which I think are often fallacious and even contradictory.

For example, ensuring that the local airport authorities, LAAs, are competitive. Why is the obligation of providing service in both languages considered compatible and not the obligation having to do with language of work and equitable participation for the two groups? It has never been shown to be more costly. Who will believe that equitable hiring and the right to work in the minority language only in the designated regions of Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick will involve significant additional costs? Why was the suggestion repeatedly made by the Commissioner of Official Languages in his annual reports of first evaluating the cost impact rejected out of hand? At least we would know what we are talking about instead of having the threat of financial disaster bandied about.

The Minister of State, senior officials of the Department of Transport and our colleague who sponsored the bill all said that the public sector has one set of rules and the private sector another.

● (1500)

In that case, why was the requirement to provide services to the public in both official languages included in Bill C-15, while those concerning the working language and equal opportunities were not? The third party to an agreement, those who at present, have an airport franchise, must, in view of their contract, meet all the obligations required of a public service.

It would seem, and I quote the sponsor of the bill on this, that "we can trust the local airport authorities". Fine, but no more than the government departments and institutions which certainly did not always live up to this trust. So, let us not be too naive here or look like gullible fools.

We are told, and this is a good one, that the privatized CN hotels inherited no constraints. Perhaps the government will have noticed, in its wisdom, that we can easily change hotels if we are dissatisfied. However, with airports, it is quite another story.

We are told that Air Canada had remained under the authority of the Official Languages Act because the government is still, for the time being, the majority shareholder of the company. It can be dangerous to be too convincing. No one reminded us that the then chairman and chief executive officer of the national airline, Air Canada, had categorically stated that he could live and prosper under such legislation. There is worse. Were we thus issued a warning that the government would amend the act respecting the privatization of Air Canada when it would see fit, in order to limit, as does Bill C-15, the linguistic rights of Canadians? If that is the case, we have the right to know. If not, why use an argument that proves nothing but creates confusion.