

[English]

—and to be able to express the point of view of the Government of Canada, the government of all Canadians, on the motion by the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan on official languages in federal institutions.

First I would like to express some amazement with respect to the position taken by the hon. member on this motion, an amazement that I am sure is shared by many members of this House and many Canadians.

The motion seems to display a perhaps deliberate misunderstanding of the very purpose and spirit of the Official Languages Act and its regulations. It seems to be challenging the very make-up of Canada's approach to language rights and, indeed, one of the founding principles of this nation.

The main purpose of the Official Languages Act, to make it clear to members opposite, is to guarantee the equality of status of French and English Canadians in the use of the two official languages in federal institutions.

• (1605)

The act rests on the principle of institutional bilingualism, the principle that federal institutions must be able to serve Canadians and to communicate with them in the official language of the choice of the citizen. In fact, the act forces neither English speaking Canadians to speak French nor French speaking Canadians to speak English. Rather it is offices of federal institutions that must be bilingual in localities where demand is sufficient for services to be in both official languages.

These are important distinctions for anyone wanting to address the issue of official languages in this country and specifically the Official Languages Act.

[Translation]

Institutional bilingualism does not mean that all employees of federal institutions must be bilingual, but that federal institutions are responsible for bilingualism. It is up to them to take all necessary measures to ensure that, wherever required by law, members of the public can be served and receive the information they need in the official language of their choice.

[English]

Institutional bilingualism means as well that Canadians of both linguistic communities may obtain employment and have a career in the federal public service in the official language of their choice. They may do so while remaining unilingual if that is their choice.

These are the principles that underlie the official languages program in federal institutions. These principles are simple and fair. They are a reflection of the rights conferred upon Canadians by our constitution. They lie at the very heart of our

*Supply*

identity and our cultural heritage. They embody the very essence of Canadian linguistic duality, one of the fundamental characteristics of this country.

These principles guarantee Canadians, whether English or French speaking, the right to receive federal services and information in the language of their choice.

[Translation]

These principles give federal employees the right to work in the official language of their choice, in circumstances and regions specified in the legislation. They also give Canadians of both linguistic communities equal opportunities for employment and promotion in federal institutions.

These basic principles are an integral part of the laws of this country. And federal institutions must see to it that Canadians can exercise these rights.

The official languages regulations on communicating with and providing services to the public enforce specific provisions of the Official Languages Act.

These regulations define the circumstances in which federal institutions must serve the public in both official languages. It may be because there is sufficient demand for their services or because of the very nature of the services provided.

The official languages program is the instrument through which federal institutions implement the official languages legislation.

In short, these are the basic principles underlying this program. I would now like to explain why, in my opinion, these principles are valid.

[English]

In my view the Canadian approach to language rights has two fundamental characteristics. It is both reasonable and just. It is reasonable because it gives Canadians the right to receive federal services in the language of their choice but, at the same time, limits the scope of these rights notably by defining significant demand. It is just because it gives Canadians open and easy access to the services of their government in both official languages enabling the vast majority of Canadians to receive services in the official language of their choice.

• (1610)

What is also remarkable about the Canadian approach is the sense of fairness and balance. In fact, that is why there is not one and only one definition of significant demand for services.

The variations that the regulations in the legislation allow may be based on the importance of the service to be provided, for instance, where health and security are involved. Obviously, any Canadian has to be able to understand the service they are being provided and to communicate.