

*Illiteracy*

The key to success is to be able to reach people where they live with a non-threatening service that fits with the schedules and way of living of these people. We have to be ready to provide allowances for those who are financially needy, for those who are handicapped and for those who are restricted by time or other commitments to participate. We have to get the message out of how important it is for them to participate. The message has to be clear and understandable. It has to be written and delivered in the kind of language which they can understand.

• (1720)

I note that my time is rapidly coming to an end. I want to say that in proposing this motion I face up to the fact that I, like anybody and everybody who is interested in this subject, do not have all the answers. No one has all the answers. But we have enough answers, enough information to realize the tremendous scope of the problem. We realize how important it is that we begin to deal with the problem. The best way that I can think of beginning to think about the problem and possibly beginning to develop plans so that we can deal with it and solve it is through establishment of a parliamentary committee which would travel across the country, hold hearings and, hopefully, hear from those who are functionally illiterate and from those who have worked in the field.

I am sure that if a committee of that type held hearings across the country and if it listened to the experts and to those who have to live with the deficiency and the problems that they face, it would make a report which would give the federal and provincial Governments, as well as the people of Canada, plans which, if implemented, would begin to help solve this very serious problem.

**Hon. William Rompkey (Grand Falls—White Bay—Labrador):** Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to be able to support the intention of the Hon. Member. Whether in fact a parliamentary committee is the most useful vehicle is a question with respect to which the studies have been done. The research into the problem and its identification have been done. What we need now is some action.

I would like to say why we need action. The Hon. Member referred to the special task force that was struck to look into illiteracy after the very valuable series of articles that was done by Southam. Indeed, as he said, the cost to businesses in the country of illiteracy is \$4 billion. The social cost is \$10 billion. Those are staggering figures. If we want to see the problem of illiteracy in context, we have to see it as a symptom. It is symptomatic of something else. It is that we just are not performing very well.

If we look at OECD studies we will see that the level of skill development in Canada is something like fourteenth among OECD countries. Yet we are heading into a society wherein the trade will be on information. We have got by in Canada by trading on natural resources. We are a country that takes minerals out of the ground and cuts down trees. We export

those products. No longer will we be able to do that. The information society will demand of Canada that it begin to trade in information. Trading information requires a skill level. The countries with which we will be competing are the OECD countries, countries such as Japan, West Germany, France and Great Britain. Each one of those countries has given a national priority to education.

One of the first things that President Mitterrand did after his re-election was to set education as a priority. I bet that when Margaret Thatcher speaks to us very soon she will refer to it. In Germany, which is a federal state like our own, there is a Bundlander commission. Every country with which we will be competing has set education as a priority. But we have not.

The Hon. Member was quite right when he asked in the face of the costs, the heavy toll on business and society, what did the federal Government do? It allocated something in the order of \$1 million to the problem. If Hon. Members were to talk to representatives of Frontier College in Toronto, they would be told that between \$17 million and \$20 million is the minimum that is needed even to address the problem. One million dollars does not even pay lip service to the problem.

Again, we have to see that type of reaction in the context of the society that we are heading into. I could list other programs which have been cut back in the face of the challenge that confronts us. The Hon. Member has already referred to them. They are cutbacks in Established Programs Financing for universities across Canada. Some \$1.6 billion was cut from the increase that was to be expected.

The Canadian Jobs Strategy has been privatized. Community colleges tell me that some of them have lost as much as 50 per cent of the funding that they had received previously in order to operate. These are our educational institutions. These are Canadian educational institutions that we are going to need to be strong as we head into the information society.

What else are we heading into? We are heading into a free trade agreement with the United States. We will need to be competitive there too. We do not know what the effect of free trade will be. We do know that there will be winners and losers. There will be Canadian businesses that will profit from free trade. There will be Canadian businesses, just as certainly, that will lose from free trade. That means that there will be a dislocation of Canadian workers. All across the country there will be some dislocation. Free trade simply exacerbates a need that already exists for training and retraining.

Every country worth its salt has given a high priority to continuous learning. Yet in this country, natives, women, the disabled, all have a terrible time gaining access to post-secondary education.

That is the context in which we have to see the Hon. Member's motion. Illiteracy is really a symptom. It is not a problem but a symptom of a problem. The problem is that we in this country are not giving education a priority because we do not have a national strategy. We have seen it as a provincial