

Official Languages

Mr. Speaker, let me explain quite clearly the major reasons for this resolution. Some have asked: "Why is Parliament being asked to debate? Why is Parliament being asked to vote on it?" Others even say, "Why did the government even bother drafting it? Isn't all of this already in the Official Languages Act?"

Well, I will agree on one point. Nothing in today's resolution deviates from the spirit or letter of the act. But, we are not debating the act; we are debating the public service official languages program. It was criticized and it caused uneasiness on the part of public servants because of the way in which it was applied or allegedly applied. That is why we want this Parliament to know the way in which we want to apply it. That is why we want the public service to know what the guidelines are and that is why the unions in the public service have been also consulted on this. The program itself has evolved remarkably in the past four years. More than almost any other recent measure I can think of it has required constant adjustment, constant improvisation and constant experimentation. After all, what we are doing in our public service has never been done before, at least not in Canada. All of us, the government and treasury board, the Public Service Commission and staff associations, have had to take a chance on the methods we thought best. And we have had to be willing to refine and even change some of our techniques and to try new ones in the light of our experience.

I am happy to say that we recently reached something of a watershed in this rather hectic effort. The results have been evaluated. And the new guidelines we promised last September, well before the result of October 30, are now embodied in a firm set of principles—that is the first part of today's resolution—and in further concrete measures—that is the second part—which we expect to pursue with consistency for some time to come. Hence today's resolution presents to this House several new, basic developments in the way we are implementing the public service languages program. Every part of the resolution carries the full support of the staff associations, and was developed in full consultation with them. I was certain that the House would want this opportunity to express its opinions as well. After all, all parties in the House support the goals of the Official Languages Act. Along with the government, the Public Service Commission and staff associations, the House is a full partner in this vital enterprise.

● (1640)

There is another reason for bringing forward this resolution. The government's language policies are intended to benefit all Canadians. But it is primarily our public servants who have to live, in a very personal sense, at the cutting edge of this fundamental change; who have to bear much of the burden for us all. We owed it to them to spell out more precisely, as soon as we could, the specific conditions of the program. To do so has been a primary purpose of this resolution.

During the past few years, I have felt a great deal of sympathy for any men and women in the public service who at any time may have felt personally threatened. I also understand the concern of public service candidates who want to know more precisely whether a second language will be required of them in a few years time.

[Mr. Trudeau.]

Today's resolution should help clear the air, certainly not by slackening the pace of our program but by making both the requirements and guarantees far more tangible, concise and precise than before. In this sense, the resolution is a matter of simple fairness to those most directly involved. It can help ensure that a vital instrument of national unity, the Official Languages Act, shall not become a tool of disunity.

My colleague, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury), will be explaining in some detail both the principles embodied in the resolution and the guidelines which flow from them. In the near future, I hope that he and I may also meet with the senior officials of the federal public service to discuss with them the substance of this resolution and to ensure an understanding of the objectives involved. I can think of no area where understanding and co-operation at all levels of the public service are more important.

There are just a few important points I should like to make now. English speaking Canadians often forget that a majority of French speaking Canadians are not bilingual—they too are unilingual. An Anglophone takes it for granted that he can work in the public service of his country, in his national capital, using his own language. A Francophone cannot. That is obviously unfair and must be changed.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Trudeau: But let us also remember this: We do not repair one man's house by removing the bricks from his neighbour's. Hence, I am speaking of both Francophones and Anglophones when I state my determination that our language policy must never be a barrier to any Canadian wanting to work in the federal public service.

[Translation]

If Canada's public service is to offer real equality of opportunity, as many public servants as possible must be able to work in their own language. It was certainly never the policy of the government that most public servants need to become bilingual to enjoy satisfying careers. On the contrary, our intention is to enable most of them to remain unilingual if they so desire.

Obviously, this will not be possible unless they can communicate in their own language with their supervisors, and with their central departmental services: the reference library, let us say, or the personnel branch. Which means a certain number of central service and supervisory positions (as well as some of those dealing with the public) will have to be held by bilingual men and women.

There are more than 250,000 public service positions in all of Canada. We estimate that about 25,000 of these must be held by bilingual officials to permit most other public servants to work in their own language. (I'm told that something like half of the 25,000 posts already are filled by bilingual persons.) By designating just these specific positions, I think we've found the best, least disruptive way to enable Canadians to work for the public service in the official language of their choice and to ensure that the federal government can serve every Canadian in his own language.