

*Official Languages*

communications which the Secretary of State possesses to know that today's debate is likely to receive more attention from the people of Canada than some other debates and that if this debate had started properly, if this parliament and the people knew exactly what this bill was about, the purpose and the objectives of bilingualism in Canada would have been well served. But in the way the bill has been introduced those objectives and that purpose have been ill served.

● (2:10 p.m.)

I rise on behalf of the New Democratic party to support the principle of the bill before us and to support its referral to the special committee. As hon. members know—if they do not, may I tell them—our party has consistently expressed support for the desirability of widening the recognition of the bilingual character of Canada. Permit me to emphasize that this policy dates back to the first day of the founding of the New Democratic party. A policy in support of Canadian bilingualism has been adopted at every federal convention of the New Democratic party, first at the founding convention in 1961 and then at subsequent conventions in 1963, 1965 and 1967. In parliament we welcomed—and I was the spokesman at that time as well—the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism when it first appeared. Also, last fall I spoke on behalf of my party in support of the resolution which preceded this bill. In short, my party's position on bilingualism has been consistent and unequivocal although, I must add, it is true that there are questions and anxieties among some members of the N.D.P. as there are among other groups in this country.

In speaking on the resolution last fall I said that personally I looked upon the measure now before us in the light both of our country's past and of its future. I emphasized that I regarded recognition of the two official languages of Canada in the way in which they are being recognized in the bill as redressing a profound oversight and an injustice which has haunted Canadians throughout the first century of our existence as a united country. I underlined my hope at that time that this long overdue step would contribute to greater understanding and unity in the future.

Canada to me has always been a bilingual country whose bilingual character has often been overlooked and ignored. I became acutely conscious of this as I grew up in Montreal and later began travelling across our vast and

diverse land. The extent to which Canadians outside the province of Quebec regarded Canada as a unilingual country was to me deeply disturbing, and this was particularly true of Canadians whose mother tongue was, like mine, neither English nor French.

I have said in many speeches I have made in many parts of the country to many minority groups of this land that they are profoundly mistaken in their attitude toward language in Canada, that it is better for them and for me as immigrants to Canada to recognize the bilingual character of the country, and above all to recognize that bilingualism is the major factor in our country's life which has prevented Canada from becoming a melting pot and has made possible the recognition of and respect for the languages and cultures of other minority groups in this land.

Bilingualism in Canada has been of great benefit to newcomers to our country, as it has been of great benefit to me and my family and to those who came to Canada at the same time as we did in the early 1920's. We learned immediately that in this country neither one language nor one culture dominates but that there are two official languages and two major cultures and that the languages and cultures of the minority groups that came to this country before us and will come after us are respected and recognized by Canadians of English and French origin. I say to them, and I say to hon. members who have sympathy for the fears of the minority groups—I share their sympathy but not their fears—that in a sense it is an insult to French speaking Canadians to insist that the English language has priority and that the French language cannot be equal to it. This kind of attitude on the part of some newcomers to this country derives from a misunderstanding of what Canada is and what Canada is about and serves to divide this country and to threaten its future in a way which none of these minority groups wants to see.

Therefore I appeal to fellow Canadians whose origin is neither English nor French to recognize the bilingual character of Canada and to recognize that no one in this country with any sense of responsibility, not even the members of this government who may not always be described in the words that I have just used, intends to force either of the two languages on anyone in this country. They will be free to learn English or French as they like, but whichever language they use they will have equal rights and equal opportunities in the federal institutions and federal

[Mr. Lewis.]