

ently refused to do. I think the public service is not served well by that refusal.

● (1420)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I have often wondered why I have so much difficulty learning French.

[Translation]

Now I understand: I am 60 years old—

[English]

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): That applause was so delayed in coming that I thought I would have to translate into English what I had said in French. This whole question of bilingualism in Canada, particularly bilingualism in the public service is, to put it mildly, a sensitive issue. Nevertheless, the fact is that parliament, with the support of all four parties, passed the Official Languages Act and has continued to support the policy of bilingualism in the public service, because we believe it should be made possible for Canadians of both our official languages to communicate freely and easily with their government. Therefore, it seems that we can only approve when the government indicates it is taking steps to try to carry out a policy decision that has been made by parliament.

It is true that along with its responsibility to develop that policy, the government also has the responsibility to be fair to the employees concerned, particularly those who are unilingual either way. We welcome the fact that this is still being recognized by the federal government. We welcome in particular the recognition—I alluded in my opening remarks to this fact—that for some persons it is difficult to learn another language. My hon. friend across the way, who just said he is having no trouble learning English, is an example of proficiency in this field, as is the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Chrétien) who, when he first came here, did not know a word of English.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I like the realism of the statement that it is necessary to carry out a study by recognized linguists to determine whether our teaching methods are filling the bill. If they are not, we believe the government would do well to see that those teaching methods are improved. On behalf of my party, I wish also to say that we like the recognition on page 9 of the report that the only way this problem of learning a second language can be resolved for Canada as a whole is for Canadians to have the chance to acquire the basic knowledge of a second language, be it English or French, at an early age.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): We believe that this recognition should be put into practice even more than it is at the present time. It is quite possible to get into a numbers game on this issue and it is quite possible to be

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aware of the sensitivities, feelings and criticism which there may be. However, Canada, being the kind of country that it is, and this parliament having endorsed the principle that bilingualism should be a fact in the public service, we believe efforts should be made to work that out with fairness to all concerned. This includes both major language groups and the rights of all those in the public service.

I have just one other word to say to the government. Acceptance of the principle of bilingualism in certain parts of Canada is helped if the policy of multiculturalism is pushed and advanced, and I urge that the government put a little more steam into that program. In fact, it might be a good idea once again to assign a full-time minister to that effort, to the development of multiculturalism in all parts of Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Réal Caouette (Témiscamingue): Mr. Speaker, I should have thought that the minister would have made a statement to the effect that the government was willing to supply the department of education of each and every Canadian province with the funds required to teach both official languages in our schools. Absolutely no more than five years would be required for all Canadians to become fully and totally bilingual. Once again we start at the end of the line.

Mr. Speaker, when I hear our minister telling us about the good intentions of the government and yet see that some departments are still hiring unilingual staff, I wonder then how sincere the minister is.

Recently I took an Air Canada flight; some of the young hostesses of 20 or 22, spoke only one language, English, and they had just been hired. I claim that if a young French-Canadian girl wants to be hired by Air Canada, she should learn English, just as an English-speaking one should have to learn French before getting a job with Air Canada.

Mr. Speaker, the minister says that 53 per cent of those who hold bilingual positions are already bilingual. Thus that leaves some 19,000 people who are mainly English-speaking. The minister should have said totally English-speaking, because in the federal ministries, no French-speaking civil servant is going to be hired if he does not speak English. I know that by experience.

Mr. Speaker, the other point that I find very hard on present civil servants is that the minister says: At the request of the government, the Civil Service Commission has accepted unilingual employees aged 60 or over. Mr. Speaker, just ask someone who is 50 or 60 years old to learn the second official language. It is almost impossible and I think it is unfair. You do not learn the second language when you are 50 years old: that is much too late. So, instead of saying: Civil servants of 60 or over, the minister should have said: 50 or over and established the maximum at 50 years of age. But we are still going to spend money to teach the two languages to the 35 or 40 year-old civil servants. I have nothing against that, on the contrary. If the government gave those millions to the provinces to allow them to teach the two languages to their young people as early as the first grade in all the provinces of Canada, we would obtain much better results