

participation of all Canadians in the institutions of Government. It reflects Canada's present linguistic reality in a manner which is consistent with both the Constitution and the fundamental principles of tolerance and fairness.

● (1130)

I believe this is a good Bill. I certainly commend it to the House for consideration and passage. This Bill is about fairness. This Bill is about equity of treatment of our fellow Canadians. This Bill is about the way in which we treat minorities in our country, and I think all of us seek to advance these principles in a tangible way. What we want in legislation is legislation that is not only sensitive but is fair to every Canadian regardless of which official language they speak.

This Bill after much consideration and deliberation attains what I consider to be an appropriate yet delicate balance in Canada which will serve as the threshold and the basis upon which we can move forward to reach the potential we have. I am heartened by the fact that there was very substantial and widespread consultation leading up to this legislation. The response to the Bill has, by and large, been superlative praise for the provisions of the legislation because it can now be said that the Bill does attain the elements of fairness and reasonableness which I think have to pervade everything we do concerning this matter. I do not consider this to be a trivial or laughing matter at all—

Mr. Blackburn (Brant): I am not laughing.

Mr. Hnatyshyn: It is a very important consideration with respect to which all of us in this House have a responsibility to assess and to make sure that the Bill does reflect those principles which all of us hold dear, namely, a united Canada, one which is based upon the fundamental principle of fairness.

I stand committed, the Government stands committed, and the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) stands committed to these very important principles.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by saying that we share the Minister's view that the Bill must be generous, must be open and must provide Canada with a more up-to-date and more equitable framework for official languages.

Mr. Speaker, I am of course delighted to be taking part in this debate on Bill C-72, because it is the culmination of almost 16 years of parliamentary experience here in the Parliament of Canada and of over 12 years experience before that in education. I have always thought it would be nice to come to the House some day and say to whatever Government would be there: I think we have made progress, we have accomplished something. To us, this Bill is a charter, a road map, as it were, that will guide us in the years to come, and I am sure it will be a beneficial experience for all Canadians. I am pleased, the Liberals are pleased and the House is pleased,

Official Languages Act

and I feel the Government is to be commended for this initiative.

As I said earlier, we want the future to be equitable and fair, more generous and more respectful of that fundamental characteristic of Canada which is its English-French linguistic duality.

Bill C-72 fulfils the 1982 constitutional commitment and recognizes the formal commitments in the Meech Lake Accord, the legal version of which was tabled in the House and approved on October 26 last year.

This Bill is therefore in line with Canadian constitutional commitments. It defines federal objectives within the framework of new and updated legislation. The Liberals felt it was imperative to proceed as soon as possible with thorough consideration of Bill C-72 which, as we all know, has been on the Order Paper since June 25 last year.

I will not repeat the endless series of complaints, criticisms and requests for action that have been addressed to the Conservative Government for the past three and a half years. A glance at the Index of *Hansard* should be self-explanatory. There have been any number of questions and answers, debates and interventions. There is enough to fill a book on the vicissitudes of the language question.

[English]

This Bill has been long awaited by various Parties concerned with the issue of official languages, among others the joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and representatives of many official language minority groups.

The Official Languages Act of 1969 has become outdated. A number of problems have surfaced as a result of applying legislation on a daily basis for 19 years. Court rulings have weakened the scope of some of the statute's provisions. The constitutional context has evolved since 1969, particularly in light of the adoption of The Charter of Rights and Freedoms and its Sections 16 to 20 respecting language rights.

The Meech Lake Accord, signed by all provincial Premiers, states clearly that our fundamental characteristic is our language duality—English and French—and that all must strive to preserve this essential characteristic.

Attitudes have changed toward languages, Mr. Speaker. Our increased awareness, respect and generosity toward official language groups have been helpful. Language training programs at all levels and in all regions of our country have shown that there exists in Canada a greater understanding and acceptance of our language duality. There is a willingness to accept and appreciate *la différence*, be it immersion courses at the elementary level, core programming in the other language in secondary schools or language training programs in the workplace. There has developed in Canada over the last 20 years a new era of understanding.