

*Official Languages Act*

● (1230)

I think I would be justified in saying that if some Members felt it took courage yesterday to be opposed to various clauses of the Bill and to bring amendments forward, I was equally impressed as far as courage is concerned and far more impressed in terms of vision by those Members of all three Parties who supported the Bill. One is tempted to look at individuals in terms of the areas from which they come. I of course speak as someone who grew up in Manitoba, who taught for the better part of a decade in the Province of British Columbia and who now lives in northwestern Ontario. I think I have some sense of the feeling in western Canada on the matter of official bilingualism. I became particularly aware of it as a professor in the history department teaching Canadian history. I could single out persons and say to myself, here was courage, here was a vision of the country being expressed, when Hon. Members of opposition Parties and almost all Hon. Members of the Conservative Party gave their support to the Bill.

I think it is worth recognizing that amendments that come forward in the House at report stage are not likely to get very serious consideration by the House. I say that with a good deal of regret and rue as a member of the Opposition. Of course, we may well put amendments forward for political purposes, but the fact is that the job has been largely done in the legislative committee and it is expected that it will be so done there.

The Government appointed as its members of the legislative committee persons almost entirely from an official language majority. Even my good friend, the Hon. Member for Charlevoix (Mr. Hamelin), is in a provincial sense a member of the majority community. In fact, the only exception to this in any kind of ongoing way would be the Hon. Member for Lachine (Mr. Layton) who could speak for the English speaking minority of Québec. The French speaking minority in the rest of the country was never represented in committee, certainly not as far as I recall.

A large opportunity was given to representatives of the English-speaking majority in Canada. As we watched them in operation, we knew that there were skeptics if not critics and outright opponents of the legislation present with opportunity to put their views forward. To his credit, the Hon. Member for Swift Current—Maple Creek (Mr. Wilson) was dogged in his persistence in some of these concerns. At times, this frustrated some of us who were watching him, but I suppose it played its part in leading the Government to put forward those provisions on regulations that represent an interesting addition to the Bill from the view of Government over-all. Perhaps it represented a very significant development for the Government of Canada. Those provisions for publicity to be given to regulations before they are finally declared so that Members of Parliament have an opportunity to comment on them were the result of the process in the legislative committee.

I can say quite advisedly, I think, as a member of the New Democratic opposition, that when amendments are put forward in the House at report stage, they are generally put forward in order to make certain important points. They are put forward to try to make changes in the Bill but also to make certain points, and from that perspective, in addressing the feelings across Canada and the opposition that I know exists among some people, I want to consider two of the amendments that were put forward. These amendments are very revealing of the kinds of attitudes that exist.

Motion No. 2B put by the Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Assiniboine (Mr. McKenzie), for example, applied to Clause 2 of the Bill and specifically to subclause (b) which declares the Act to be in support of the development of English and French linguistic minority communities and generally advance the equality of status and use of the English and French languages within Canadian society. The Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Assiniboine wanted to strike out the words relating to equality of status. He was prepared to allow this Bill, when finally passed and proclaimed, to support the use of English and French but equality of status stuck in his craw.

Amendment No. 28A put by the Hon. Member for Bow River (Mr. Taylor) was put forward quite late in the process at report stage. It was even more revealing because it dealt with the very important matter of when the Government of Canada might respond to the existence of minority official language communities, whether the English-speaking minority in Québec or the French-speaking minority in other parts of Canada. The proposal put forward by the Hon. Member for Bow River was that an area in which there is significant demand may be established if the number of persons in the area in respect of an official language spoken as a mother tongue is at least 51 per cent of the total number of persons residing in the area. That has to be about the most incredible amendment that could be put forward. The Government would respond, under this proposal, only if the official language minority happens to be the majority in the area. I do not know from where this idea came, but it is a splendid example of the kind of proposal which might have come forward at the legislative committee, been given short shrift and then set aside.

I am not meaning to ridicule a particular proposal or the Member who put it forward so much as I mean to indicate that in these two motions, we see the kind of feeling that exists in some parts of the country among persons who have not yet accepted the necessity of the policy of official bilingualism to which all three Parties, the Parliament of Canada and the Government of Canada have been committed since 1969. What I find particularly distressing about the failure to accept that is the way in which those who oppose the policy make demands on ordinary Canadians because they do not want to see the Government of Canada establish expectations for itself and for the persons who work in the Public Service.