

to the luncheon recess so that all three leaders can make their presentations together?

**Mr. Lewis:** Madam Speaker, we have discussed this possibility. On behalf of the Government, I am prepared to suggest that we would be amenable to extending the sitting and not seeing the clock at one o'clock in order to allow all three leaders to complete their remarks before two o'clock.

**Mr. Riis:** Madam Speaker, I think it is only fair to extend appreciation to the Government as well as the Official Opposition for their generosity. I realize this sets aside some of the normal practices to facilitate the three leaders. I simply want to say that I appreciate the generosity.

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## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS--MOTIONS

[English]

### LITERACY

#### JOINT CANADA-UNITED NATIONS ATTACK ON ILLITERACY

**Mr. David Orlikow (Winnipeg North)** moved:

That a special committee of the House should be established to consider Canada's serious and growing illiteracy problem and recommend ways that the Government, in conjunction with the provinces and territories, can join the United Nations attack on illiteracy.

He said: Madam Speaker, I moved this motion because I, like many other Canadians, recognize that the world is experiencing a revolution in the way we live and work. New technology moves so quickly and changes so rapidly that the ability of people to live and work is almost completely dependent upon their ability to read, write and understand it.

Many newspaper and magazine articles, and radio and television stories have told us of Canadians who are functionally illiterate and face a tremendous loss because of their inability to read and write. We have defined functional illiteracy as those people with less than eight completed years of schooling. Experts in the field are now beginning to define functional literacy as the ability to use printed and written information to function in society. Therefore, they are saying that the definition of eight years which has been used in the past is really too restrictive.

We like to think that our country is a modern industrialized society, one of the developed countries, yet according to a number of studies conducted by governments and voluntary agencies, most recently a study done for Southam News, five million Canadians are functionally illiterate. That is 20 per cent of Canadians.

We know that illiteracy increases as one moves from west to East, rising from a low of 17 per cent among adults in British Columbia to an astonishing high of 44 per cent in Newfoundland. We know that illiteracy is higher among men than women and that 100,000 illiterates a year are added to the Canadian population. Tragically, only one in ten of all

### *Illiteracy*

illiterates would ever consider taking remedial classes of the kind that are presently offered by various agencies. We know that drop-out rates of 50 per cent have been recorded in some of the current programs.

Before the present Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) took office three and one-half years ago, he appointed a task force to look at the whole question of manpower retraining. That task force recommended a federal-provincial conference for the sole purpose of developing an action plan to combat illiteracy. It also recommended a public advocacy campaign about illiteracy and immediate work on developing teaching materials for volunteer teachers. No action along these lines has been taken.

A recent study by the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy estimated that the cost of illiteracy due to lost income is estimated at \$4 billion per year in 1987 dollars. The cost to society is estimated at \$10 billion. This figure is based on the difference between the average income of all income recipients, employed and unemployed, whose level of education is Grade 8 or less and those whose average incomes include some high school. The study assumes that the economy is strong enough to absorb additional employment from those whose skill and educational levels have been upgraded.

The study highlighted a number of labour demand trends and skill implications, including the decline of unskilled and muscle work; the increasing demands of technology which require literacy and numeracy skills; the rise in basic skill levels required for entry level positions. As well, 85 per cent of occupations require Grade 9 or better reading levels, and most jobs require about two hours of reading per day.

That is the reality of what is happening in this country. When people hear that a fifth of the people of Canada have been classified as functionally illiterate, they automatically assume that these are people who live in rural areas, who did not have the educational facilities we have in the cities and towns, or live in remote areas in the North. The fact is that studies which have been done tell us that 8 per cent of university graduates are functionally illiterate; 11 per cent of community college or trade school graduates are functionally illiterate; 13 per cent of university drop-outs, 17 per cent of high school graduates and 24 per cent of high school drop-outs are functionally illiterate. This situation can only be described as a national disaster.

In the Speech from the Throne after the Government was first elected, Canadians were promised that a major aim of the Conservative Government would be to deal with the question of illiteracy. The former Secretary of State, Mr. Crombie, promised on several occasions a major program that would be encouraged and financed at least in part by the federal Government. We have seen very little in the way of real effort or real change.

There is a small task force attached to the Secretary of State office which is doing some interesting survey work. There is some small effort by the Solicitor General for people