

Oral Questions

The hon. member will have to admit, and she should tell Canadians and this House, that the government has acted in partnership with the provinces to help address the shortcomings of our system for acquiring knowledge in this country.

• (1420)

In the last Speech from the Throne—perhaps the hon. member would care to refresh her memory—we introduced our Prosperity Initiative. Two distinguished Canadians, Ms. Marie-Josée Drouin of Québec and Mr. McCambly head a group that, in consultation with all Canadians, is trying to meet the challenge of the next century: the acquisition of knowledge. I think it would be of interest of the hon. member for the Liberal Party to show some desire to co-operate with other Canadians instead of doing nothing and always pointing to the dark side of our country, because after all, we have a wonderful country. Read the report.

[*English*]

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Mr. Speaker, the report says that Canadian young people are graduating from school without knowing how to read or write. That is what the report says.

The report also says that when you consider federal government initiatives; labour market adjustment program—poor; apprenticeship programs—poor; research and development—appalling; help for French schools outside Quebec—poor; the areas for which the federal government is responsible are a total failure.

I ask the Prime Minister this question. Instead of closing down the legitimate criticisms of the Economic Council of Canada, will he not open his government's approach to a real strategy to deal with the almost one million Canadians who may graduate without being able to read or write over the next 10 years?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Employment and Immigration): Welcome to the real world. Mr. Speaker, these people should look at what is happening in this country. What is the prosperity initiative all about? We talk with individual Canadians all around the country and we ask them to be a part of the revamping of the education system. We have devoted resources and money to do it.

Members opposite say that we are dismissing those areas where we could do better. It is not the truth, it is not a fact. The hon. member should come of age and see what is happening now and respect the fact of provincial power over education. Stop indicting our teachers and our schools. We are not doing that badly and we can do better—we acknowledge that—and we will do it with them.

Mr. Maurizio Bevilacqua (York North): Mr. Speaker, I have never heard so much nonsense as in the first two answers. The Economic Council's report clearly points to a national crisis. This nation cannot afford to have one million illiterate young people join our labour force by the year 2000. It is evident that this government's policy on illiteracy has been a total disaster.

Why has the government allowed this problem to reach such a dangerous level?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Employment and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, when the hon. member talks about hearing nonsense, obviously he was at his caucus this morning.

The fact of the matter is that learning is a challenge that all Canadians face. We have to respect the jurisdiction of provincial governments over education.

All we can do at the federal level is be a partner with the provinces, with individual Canadians, with our dedicated teachers in trying to improve the situation.

Members opposite are picturing Canada as if it is a banana republic in terms of education. That is not what the report said. It said we can improve. We are intent on improving education but we are not dictating to the provinces or the people what to do, but working with them.

Mr. Maurizio Bevilacqua (York North): Mr. Speaker, I have a supplementary question for the same minister.

As you play your political football games with the provinces—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Please put the question.

Mr. Bevilacqua: A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker. As the minister plays his political football games with the provinces, who loses out are those young Canadians who are being cheated by this government's system on this particular issue.