

Official Languages Act

I suggest that this Bill is flawed because it does not give Parliament the opportunity to look at the requirements allowing orders in council to be passed, implementing mandatory regional workplace bilingualism. That is what the debate is about. Could the Minister respond?

Mr. Lewis: Madam Speaker, Clauses 81 and 82 provide for the review on a permanent basis of all regulations and directives. I stated specifically that one consideration may be to provide for those regulations and directives to be reviewed prior to implementation. We are reluctant to pin down numbers in the legislation because it would be difficult to change the Act if there were changes in circumstances.

Debates of this kind are often difficult. Legislative schedules of Government often include other priorities. One may take the case of 5,000 fishermen on the south shore of Nova Scotia who are francophone Acadians. The fisheries officers may well have to be bilingual. However, if all the Acadians were involved in fishing—which I do not know—it may not be as important for people at the agricultural station to be bilingual.

My point is that by leaving it to regulations which are brought about by a consultative process, that are discussed ahead of time and subject to review by a parliamentary committee, we would have the best of both worlds. Clause 31 describes the basic criteria and those regulations should come under Clause 31 and therefore be up for review.

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand Robichaud (Westmorland—Kent): Madam Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to speak today to a Bill that I consider vitally important for the country's linguistic minorities. I am of course referring to the Official Languages Act, that to us—when I say us, I mean Acadians, Francophones residing outside Quebec—is particularly important. The Government is to be commended for introducing the Bill at this time, and indeed I want to congratulate the Government for doing so. I also hope that the debate on this Bill will be non-partisan, so that the proposed legislation can be dealt with as quickly as possible.

I said that I congratulated the Government, and I also want to congratulate the Minister of Justice (Mr. Hnatyshyn) who said yesterday, and I support him wholeheartedly in this:

[English]

The renewal of our language policy is intended for all Canadians. It provides for the needs of the majorities by guaranteeing government services for them in their own language. In addition, it recognizes the aspirations of minorities, who have often expressed a desire, and rightly so, to live and prosper using their own language. This Bill reflects the open-mindedness and tolerance of Canadians in matters of language and culture. This generosity of Canadians toward each other is one of the most endearing features of our national identity.

• (1210)

[Translation]

Madam Speaker, I think all Members of this House would do well to read this paragraph from the speech made by the Minister of Justice yesterday. It says a great deal about the Bill and about Canadians.

I am sure the proposed legislation will make a lot of associations and a lot of people happy as well, and I am thinking particularly of the Fédération des francophones hors Québec, which at a press conference last week urged the Government to act on the official languages question. The Government was asked to take concrete action as quickly as possible, since we had waited long enough.

Today, the President of the Fédération des francophones hors Québec, Mr. Yvon Fontaine, must be pleased, since the final words of his press release were:

“We believe the federal Government should take action as soon as possible so that the Official Languages Act can become effective without further delay.”

Those were Mr. Fontaine's concluding remarks. Well, his wish has almost come true, since we are now at the second reading stage. Madam Speaker, I repeat that I hope we will be able to proceed quickly with the second and third reading stages and that the Bill is adopted as soon as possible.

I also wish to say a few words about an association I know rather well, Canadian Parents for French, who should also be pleased with what is happening here today, especially if they have read, and I am sure they have, the following in the preamble to the Bill, and I quote:

The Government of Canada is committed to cooperating with provincial governments and their institutions to support the development of English and French linguistic minority communities, to provide services in both English and French, to respect the constitutional guarantees of minority language educational rights and to enhance opportunities for all to learn both English and French;

Of course Canadian Parents for French are delighted, because they have seen it as their role to promote the other official language, in their case French, since most members of this association are English-speaking.

This Bill, as we have said before, is the work of a number of individuals, a number of organizations, associations and even governments. However, I do not think taking the credit is an issue here. The important thing is that we have reached this stage. We have reached our goal, or at least we are well on our way to doing so.

To me, as an Acadian, the Bill also fills a gap left by the Meech Lake Accord. Granted, the Accord recognizes English-speaking and French-speaking minorities. There was also a commitment to preserve that fundamental characteristic of Canada, but only from the province of Quebec. And this is what I would have liked to see in the Meech Lake Accord,