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French language and the new Canadian Constitution, 1

France participates in Expo 86, 3

New keys to cancer detection, 3

Northwest Territories split approved by Ottawa, 4

Canada proposes world videotex marriage to create global super system, 5

Asia Pacific Foundation study, 5

Parliament to consider mandatory supervision amendments, 6

New Year's first stamp features Point Pelee National Park, 6

Brazil buys Canadian communications satellites, 6

News of the arts — music, painting, literature, 7

News briefs, 8

French language and the new Canadian Constitution

In a recent speech to the Association France-Amérique in Paris, Canada's Commissioner for Official Languages Max Yalden outlined the status of the French language in Canada, particularly in light of recent changes in the Canadian Constitution.

He noted that as recently as 20 years ago, the French language was used within the federal government "more by accident than by design", with Francophone representation in the public service largely restricted to government agencies located in Quebec and in the national capital. Furthermore, Francophones were far fewer in number than Anglophones in management ranks and rare in the key technical, scientific and economic sectors.

The need for reform and the profound changes unfolding in Quebec during the Sixties sparked the creation in 1963 of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism with a mandate to report on the state of bilingualism in Canada. "The Commission sounded the alarm by stating that, unless major reforms took place, the future of Canada was gravely endangered," said Mr. Yalden.

One of the Commission's key recommendations was the adoption in 1969 of

the Official Languages Act which gave French and English "equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all the institutions of the Parliament and government of Canada". This means that members of the public were given the right to receive federal services in the official language of their choice.

The Commission also established the office of the Commissioner of Official Languages whose role is to act as a linguistic ombudsman, auditor and spokesman on official language matters, Mr. Yalden pointed out.

The new legislation was designed to ensure that all government departments and agencies dealing with the public — including Crown corporations such as Canada Post or Air Canada — provide their services in both French and English. Services of a cultural nature (radio and television), and legal or judicial matters (the courts and the penitentiary system) must all be provided in both languages.

Mr. Yalden emphasized that the proposed language reform did not call for a policy of universal individual bilingualism. "There was no question of providing absolute guarantees that Francophones might live in French at every hour of the day everywhere in Canada or that Anglophones might do likewise everywhere in Quebec.... What must be borne in mind is that federal authorities have always set as their first priority the development of bilingual institutions designed to enable Francophones to feel at ease in their dealings with the federal government and to have access to federal services on terms equal to those enjoyed by their Anglophone fellow citizens. The primary means of achieving this objective has been to promote French in departments and agencies of the Parliament and government of Canada."

Progress to date

According to Mr. Yalden, "progress so far has not been sufficient to convince our Francophone compatriots...that they can



Max Yalden



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