

Statements by Ministers

Declaration of Human Rights. It states that recognition of the inherent dignity, and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

I am glad that 40 years after the creation of the UN, the International Year of Peace has offered us an opportunity to reflect on the conditions for the survival of our rights, and our survival as human beings. On behalf of all Canadians I want to say that we remain as committed to the Universal Declaration now as we were 38 years ago.

Last month Governor General Jeanne Sauvé accepted the Nansen Medal from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Jean-Pierre Hocké. The award was not made to any one citizen of Canada but to the people of Canada in, "recognition of their major and sustained contribution to the cause of refugees."

● (1610)

The Nansen Medal was created in 1954 and this was the first time it has ever been awarded to a country. I think that says a lot for the freedom loving spirit for which we are recognized and respected throughout the world. When we talk of human rights in Canada, we mean equality for all Canadians irrespective of gender, language, race, religion, economic status or disability. We in Canada realize the value of a multicultural and multiracial community and the strength it gives to our citizenship and Canadian identity.

[Translation]

For example, Canada's respect for its two main language groups is reflected in the Official Languages Act, which is under intensive review at the moment by the Department of Justice. As well, the Government is considering several very significant improvements to the use of both official languages in our dealings with the provinces, volunteer associations, and the private sector. The President of the Treasury Board is also developing a full range of initiatives to further enhance the profile of our official languages within federal institutions.

In addition to English and French, dozens of other heritage languages are spoken across the nation. In recognition of the cultural wealth that lies in a multilingual identity, the Government supports studies in languages and cultural retention.

[English]

We have made commendable strides during the last four decades, but we must go on achieving if we are to expand our concepts of equality and freedom. Although we entrenched our Charter of Rights and Freedoms four years ago in the Constitution of Canada, this was just one major stepping stone of others to come.

As you know, the Secretary of State (Mr. Crombie) is funding the Charter Challenge Program through the Canada Council on Social Development. The resolution of specific

Charter cases in the courts will further change and improve our notions of equality and what we have to do to get there.

This is a significant move forward for Canadians. The Government has made a firm commitment to full implementation of the Charter. Clearly, our readiness to confront challenges in matters of fundamental human rights, and to provide the means of ensuring full access to the courts, demonstrates our commitment to one of the key elements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to an effective remedy for violations of rights.

Defending an increasing respect for human rights also extends beyond Canada's institutions. This respect must continue to form the solid basis of individual and community life. No greater protection can be granted to human rights than an aware and enlightened public.

The role of the voluntary sector, our hundreds of dedicated non-profit organizations, is especially important in this regard. These groups touch the heart of local communities and directly involve millions of Canadians in their efforts.

[Translation]

On this day, we celebrate the proclamation of the universal declaration of Human Rights. I think it is fitting that we celebrate the many forward steps that we have taken over the last four decades.

I think it is also important that we acknowledge and support the tremendous contributions made by Canadian individuals and organizations in making that progress possible.

Finally, we must use this opportunity to acknowledge that we have a long way to go before we can be completely satisfied with our progress. Our record is good—actually very good—but there is yet some room to grow.

We must therefore maintain our vigilance at home, and continue to exert our influence abroad. We have to think of more creative ways to encourage the human rights cause in countries where they are now merely empty expressions.

[English]

Canada's devotion to equality was given even greater credence last March when our Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) signed a proclamation committing Canada to a program of action over the next decade to unite in a stand against racial discrimination. Although this took place quite appropriately during the current International Year of Peace, we are also in the second United Nations Decade to Combat Racism.

Let us hope, therefore, that the fair-minded hearts and souls of Canadians will grow stronger throughout the land, and then influence the global community so that no third such decade need ever be declared.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Roland de Corneille (Eglinton—Lawrence): Mr. Speaker, if December 7, 1971 was to go down in history as a day of infamy, then December 10, 1948 was a day of hope. On