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CANADA'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGES BILL

Statement by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau
in the House of Commons, October 17, 1968.

Many of the bills which are placed before Members of this House are concerned with a specific problem, or a single occupation, or one region of the country. The Official Languages Bill is a reflection of the nature of this country as a whole, and of a conscious choice we are making about our future.

Canada is an immense and an exciting country, but it is not an easy country to know. Even under modern conditions it is a long and expensive trip from St. John's to Vancouver or from Windsor to Inuvik. The great differences of geography, history and economics within our country have produced a rich diversity of temperament, viewpoint and culture.

This is easy to state, and it has been repeated in hundreds of patriotic speeches; but without the direct experience which has not been available to most Canadians, it is difficult to appreciate it fully.

The most important example of this diversity is undoubtedly the existence of the two major language groups, both of which are strong enough in numbers and in material and intellectual resources to resist the forces of assimilation. In the past this underlying reality of our country has not been adequately reflected in many of our public institutions.

Much of our political theory and tradition has been inherited from the major countries of Western Europe. It happens that the majority of these countries are relatively homogeneous in language and culture. It has been practical for many of them to operate on the principle "one state, one language". For Canadian descendants of West Europeans this has often appeared to be the normal situation, subject to a few unimportant exceptions. Even today it is not unknown for a European statesman to offer advice on the future of this country based on such Old World ideas.

Looked at from a contemporary world viewpoint, it is the apparently homogeneous states of Western Europe which are the exception. Many Eastern European, Asian and African states contain within a single political unit a great variety of languages, religions and cultures. In many of them this diversity is reflected in a federal system of government and in two or more official languages. In the past multicultural states have often resulted from conquest or colonialism. In the modern world, many are based on a conscious appreciation of the facts of history, geography and economics.