

Official Languages

But it would have been much wiser psychology, after having spent two or three weeks on the amendments to the Criminal Code, which are important but do not put bread on anybody's plate, to deal with some matters for a week or two that may put some bread on somebody's plate before entering a discussion on this bill. It would not have lessened the priority or importance of this bill. It would have shown the people of this country that the government is not merely concerned about dealing with pet projects of the Prime Minister but is also concerned about matters just as important and equally pressing as language rights.

[Translation]

Mr. Caouette: Mr. Speaker, I listened very attentively this morning to the remarks made by the Secretary of State (Mr. Pelletier), the Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Stanfield), and the hon. member for York South (Mr. Lewis).

At the outset of their comments, the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. member for York South blamed the government for keeping silent about possible amendments to the bill before us, but they were very careful not to mention the ones they would favour. They said, further on, that they accepted the principle of the bill but that amendments should be made to the bill in order perhaps to modify its principle. Therefore, there is nothing very clear in all that.

Mr. Speaker, the clearest thing at this stage is this: Bill C-120 was put on the order paper of the house under the authority of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau).

The Prime Minister, as can be seen, is absent. He was here this morning during part of the speech made by the Secretary of State and part of the speech delivered by the Leader of the Opposition. Then, he disappeared. Maybe he has other engagements but—and here I agree with the hon. member for York South—he should be here, at least to have an idea of the various parties' points of view on this first day of debate on the official languages bill.

Mr. Mongrain: He can read *Hansard*.

Mr. Cacuetie: The hon. member for Trois-Rivières (Mr. Mongrain) says that the Prime Minister can read *Hansard*. He does not even have time to read it and one of his assistants will no doubt report to him what was said in the house.

At any rate, we regret that the Prime Minister is not here on this first day of the debate on this bill.

We think that Bill C-120 is not a bill of utmost importance for Canada. Other subjects might have been discussed; namely the economic situation.

The unemployment rate is increasing and I think this is more important than to know whether the unemployed speaks English or French. It is also more important to know whether our needy mothers must have something to eat, something to wear, a convenient place to live in than to know whether they speak English or French.

This does not mean that the official languages bill is not important, but I think it should rather proceed from an economic and social system enabling every human being to enjoy at least security and freedom. Then, we could discuss the matter of official languages in Canada.

We approve the bill on the official languages, but we still maintain that it is not essential, that it is not the question we should now be discussing when the Canadian people need specific and constructive measures from the government.

● (2:50 p.m.)

But the government prefers to let us play around for four weeks with the bill on official languages. I hope it will be dealt with fairly quickly and that it will be passed without delay by the house.

Now, the unfortunate thing is that in many regions, as the hon. member for York South said a while ago, the question of national unity and bilingualism has lost ground in Canada over the past year, and that we probably should have dealt with it over a year ago. Then the hon. member contradicts himself and says that the question is not all that important. But it is one of two things, either it is important or it is not.

Is bilingualism losing ground in Canada? I do not think so. I had the opportunity of visiting western Canada, just a few weeks ago. I went to Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina and Winnipeg. There I met people of English, Ukrainian, Polish, German, Italian origin, in short, people of all nationalities or languages; they are worried because people of bad faith told them that the bill on the official languages would force them to speak French or English, when they know nothing of either language.