

Official Languages Act

Mr. Gauthier: . . . and we came out with a report that was tabled in the House. At that point, we realized that the Government was beginning to show a little courage. Suggestions had to be made to the Government, of course, but that can happen. Last Thursday, my colleague from St-Jacques (Mr. Guilbault) rose in the House and proposed that since certain people wanted to create a crisis where there was none, the Government should use Standing Order 115 and move forward. We did not tell the Government to make it one day, one short day, and two hours; we simply told the Government we would support it if it decided to use Standing Order 115 to limit debate. The Government subsequently decided to put a very tight rein on the debate, but that was not our decision. We merely tried to get the Government to act.

Yesterday evening, Mr. Speaker, this House approved the Committee report as tabled in the House. It contained 136 amendments, but even though I personally might have been willing to spend all night here, some of my colleagues did not relish the prospect, and we voted. We decided not only to act responsibly but also to consider all the staff of the House who had to wait. It was chiefly for their sake that I suggested to my House leader that we could apply the result of one vote to the other votes and dispense with the recorded votes. It took time, but it was worth it, Mr. Speaker. After 20 years of waiting, getting concurrence in the report stage of a new Act was important, at least for me. However, for some Conservative Members who, as I say, still had doubts about the principle of linguistic duality it may not have been a very pleasant experience. For us, it was the fruit of years of unremitting hard work.

Mr. Speaker, I will not go on at length about the amendments considered yesterday. They might receive more recognition than they deserve. Happily, I think we have passed that difficult stage, and we can put them aside. Nevertheless, we have seldom seen a Government forced to gag its own Members . . .

An Hon. Member: No, I think it is the first time.

Mr. Gauthier: . . . on one of its own bills. It is a historic event.

On the one hand, the Government refuses to disavow the dishonorable actions of its language reactionaries. On the other hand, it limits debate to prevent them from speaking. That is a form of disapproval. Mr. Speaker telling us, as the Government did, to wait for the vote today to find out whether they would disavow the "dinosaurs" is, to me, unacceptable. As I said yesterday, it is like telling us a thief is only guilty if caught; it is like telling us a liar is guilty only if caught. It makes no logical sense. At the end of the day, though, we will see whether these reactionaries will be called to account for their decision.

Mr. Speaker, if one does not agree with another's statements, one must say so. Why wait! And if Conservative Members make unacceptable statements, they should be told as much. And they must accept their responsibilities. In any

case, the main thing is that the Bill is now at third reading stage and will be passed. Even though the Government is not unanimously for it, the official Opposition at least will be. That is not how we Liberals work. We work as a team, and we make progress as a team.

Mr. Speaker, Bill C-72 is appreciably different from the 1969 Act. I would like to make a few comments on the Bill. The new Act contains a 10-point preamble that clearly establishes the link between what is enshrined in the Constitution and the spirit of generosity and reform on which interpretation of the Act must be based. Under the Interpretation Act, the preamble is a part of the Act intended to assist in explaining its purport and object. The preamble to Bill C-72 mentions sections 16 to 20 of the Charter and the federal Government's commitment to protect and promote bilingualism and official language minorities. In this respect, the Act goes further than the Constitutional Accord of 1987, which recognizes only the federal Government's duty to preserve the linguistic duality.

It is stated that Canadians have the right of access, under the Constitution, to the institution of Parliament and the Government. Bill C-72 contains the necessary provisions to ensure that this constitutional right is respected. It is stated that the Government will support the development of minority groups, enhance the bilingual character of the National Capital, encourage the business community to promote the official languages. All of this is repeated in Bill C-72, and I know, Mr. Speaker, because we will be watching very closely, it will help strengthen the linguistic situation.

With regard to other legislation, I should point out that the Bill contains some important legal rights. In particular, Section 82 provides for the primacy of the Act. As you will recall, that was the subject of a number of recommendations by the Joint Committee on Official Languages, since it had been recognized as a weakness of the 1969 Act. I myself introduced a number of Bills between 1979 and 1986 in an attempt to give the Act primacy over all other legislation.

Clearly then, this is not a new idea, and this Government did not invent it. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize what has been accomplished, and since the primacy of the Act is assured, I have achieved my goal and I am satisfied.

Mr. Speaker, Part II of the Bill deals with legislative and other instruments such as federal-provincial agreements. The Government decided to take up one of my amendments to this Part and incorporate it into the Bill. It is a new section, specifically section 8, which deals with the tabling of documents in the House. It will force the Government to table its documents in the House in both official languages, which it did not have to do before today.

With regard to federal statutes, there is nothing new. For many years, they have been enacted by Parliament in both official languages and both versions have equal weight and force of law.