

Supply

In conclusion, I urge the government to do its job, to make good on its many promises and to reinstate as soon as possible a program that we truly need here in Canada, one that makes Canada a wonderful country, one of the only countries in the world where these constitutional rights can be defended before the courts. We cannot stop now.

[*English*]

Hon. Gerry Weiner (Minister of Multiculturalism and Citizenship): Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by joining the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier in wishing good health and speedy recovery to the member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville. She is indeed a good friend of mine and a good friend of all those who fight for equality and minority rights across this country.

I would like to thank the member for the manner in which he clearly laid out the issue and the comprehensive understanding which he has brought to it. Certainly his defence of the rights of official language communities and minorities from coast to coast has been vigorous and effective throughout. During the time I had the privilege and pleasure to work the official language file with the hon. member as my critic I always knew I could count on his full participation. Certainly he was very helpful in rendering the program fully accountable.

I hope that whatever progress we made was a result of the strength of the partnership we had.

I would like to spend a few minutes responding to the motion of the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier. I think it is fair to say at the outset that my hon. colleague and I, and indeed all of us in this House, recognize the contribution that the Court Challenges Program has made to this country.

It is also fair to say that by any measure the Court Challenges Program has been a successful program.

[*Translation*]

We must also admit that this program is absolutely incomparable. Nowhere else in the world, be it in the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe or elsewhere, does a government give its citizens the financial resources to challenge its own laws, practices and regulations and to ensure that they are applied fairly and equitably.

[*English*]

This is a singularly Canadian enterprise, a made-in-Canada program. Canada alone conceived this policy. Canada alone drafted the terms of the program. Canada alone implemented those terms with results that had and will continue to contribute to the development of social policy over the last decade and a half and into the future.

On this point we do not differ. However it should also be acknowledged that it is this government that has spent more than any other government in supporting this type of program. Our contribution has been unprecedented. This is a legacy of which all of us can be justifiably proud, more so than any other party in this House.

Perhaps it would be useful at this point to briefly review the genesis and evolution of the Court Challenges Program. Established in 1978, its initial purpose was to provide financial aid for the preparation and defence of test cases intended to clarify language rights under the Constitution Act of 1867.

After the adoption and proclamation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 the government of the day expanded and updated the program so that litigants would be provided with sufficient funds to challenge federal and provincial legislation pertaining to the equal status of official languages and minority language education rights.

That essentially applied to sections 16 to 23 of the charter.

Some three years later, in April 1985, section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect. Shortly thereafter, in September of that same year, this government again broadened the application of the challenges program.

These reforms provided funding for cases to test federal laws, policies, and practices based on the equality clauses of section 15, the equality of sexes clauses of section 28, and the multiculturalism clauses of section 27 when used in conjunction with arguments based on section 15.

At the same time the government decided to give the administration of this program, which until then had been the responsibility of the Department of Secretary of State, to the Canadian Council on Social Development, an independent agency.