

*Official Languages Act**[Translation]*

We have approached the matter of official languages in this same spirit of fairness and equity from the very beginning. When we took office in the autumn of 1984, we stated clearly that one of the Government's aims would be to broaden and strengthen the national consensus on language policy. In the Throne Speech delivered on November 5, 1984, this commitment was expressed in these solemn words: "National unity also demands that the two levels of government co-operate in supporting official language minorities and in fostering the rich multicultural character of Canada. My Government is committed to ensuring that the equality of the two official languages—so vital to our national character and identity—is respected in fact as it is in law. My Ministers acknowledge the need for ongoing improvements and for vigilance in this indispensable area of our national life."

*[English]*

In 1985, the Prime Minister took note of the recommendations of the Commissioner of Official Languages in his annual report as well as the recommendations of the Standing Joint Committee on Official Languages in its second report. He asked three Ministers primarily responsible for language matters, the Minister of Justice, the President of the Treasury Board and the Secretary of State, to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the Government's over-all policy in this field and to seek ways of improving it. Ministers were seconded in their efforts by a special senior committee of Deputy Ministers which was designated by the Prime Minister to co-ordinate the renewal.

The Official Languages Act was already under study by the Department of Justice in the context of Charter conformity review. That study was broadened to ensure that, as the Prime Minister stated, that vital piece of legislation was strengthened, enhanced and adapted to new conditions and requirements.

The Throne Speech of October 1986 further underlined this commitment in the following terms:

Official bilingualism is an indispensable feature of our national character. Seventeen years after its enactment, Canada's Official Languages Act now needs to be revised. Appropriate legislation will be introduced in this Session to ensure, as well, that this Act conforms with the Canadian Charter of Rights.

Shortly after I accepted the responsibilities of Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada in 1986, I stated to the Canadian Bar Association that the re-enactment of the Official Languages Act to ensure conformity with both the letter and the spirit of the Constitution and the implementation of the rights of accused persons to be tried in their own official language under the Criminal Code would be matters of particular importance to me as Minister of Justice, and important elements in the advancement of the Government's policies of social justice and national reconciliation.

It took much of the next year for my colleagues, the President of the Treasury Board, the Secretary of State and I to complete the review and develop renewed policies and programs respecting the use of official languages not only within federal institutions but also within the larger Canadian

society. This endeavour required us to review, study and consult in order to ensure that the reforms the Government would be proposing would be balanced ones, reforms which would move official languages policy forward but which would be fair and just for all Canadians and which could be implemented in a reasonable, effective and practical manner.

This painstaking process of consultation and consensus-building did not end with the introduction of Bill C-72 in June of 1987. Despite the very positive reaction the Bill received from the opposition Parties, representatives of the official language minority communities, the Commissioner of Official Languages and major media across the nation, there were further consultations with the Commissioner, minority language organizations and Members of Parliament to pursue any further concerns that may have come up during the general reaction following the introduction of the Bill.

Information sessions were held with various bodies such as the Canadian Judicial Council and the Conference of Canadian Court Administrators. Much correspondence took place with members of the public and with officials of some provincial Governments as well as with a number of provincial Attorneys General.

Such consultations led to the coming into force of the language of trial provisions of the Criminal Code in Saskatchewan and with regard to summary conviction offences in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Discussions with the two territorial Governments continued and this resulted in the signing of the recent Canada-Yukon language agreement.

As I had stated before in this House, ours is a Government that believes in communication, consultation and co-operation. These virtues, I believe, are essential to foster understanding, acceptance and development of official languages policy in Canada.

Obviously we do have a complex Bill before us, but concerns and questions arise in any legislative initiative, and it has been our duty as legislators to address these and to resolve them. The principles of the Bill were approved by this House on second reading and it has been the firm resolve of the Government not to deviate from these principles. However, as I remarked on March 22 of this year during the opening statement to the legislative committee studying Bill C-72, we remained as a Government ready and willing to consider appropriate proposals for clarification and improvement.

During the next two months, a wide range of witnesses were heard and views were expressed and we heard the comments and questions of committee members. On May 25, having followed the committee's proceedings very closely, I indicated the type of amendments which commended themselves to the Government. The amendment proposals I presented to the legislative committee on behalf of the Government were, I believe, a fair and balanced package that maintained our clear commitment to the underlying philosophy and principles of this legislation.