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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.

In Canada, a country blessed with more prosperity and political stability than most, we are making our choices methodically and democratically.

In all parts of the country, within both language groups, there are those who call for uniformity. It will be simpler and cheaper, they argue. In the case of the French minority, isolation is prescribed as necessary for survival. We must never underestimate the strength or the durability of these appeals to profound human emotions.

Surely these arguments are based on fear, on a narrow view of human nature, and on a defeatist appraisal of our capacity to adapt our society and its institutions to the demands of its citizens. Those who argue for separation, in whatever form, are prisoners of past injustice, blind to the possibilities of the future.

We have rejected this view of our country. We believe in two official languages and in a pluralist society, not merely as a political necessity but as an enrichment. We want to live in a country in which French-Canadians can choose to live among English-Canadians and English-Canadians can choose to live among French-Canadians without abandoning their cultural heritage.

Those of us who have some experience of the difficulties and opportunities of this course are conscious of the risk. But we are convinced that, as a country and as individuals, we must take it. French Canada can survive not by turning in on itself but by reaching out to claim its full share of every aspect of Canadian life. English Canada should not attempt to crush or expect to absorb French Canada. All Canadians should capitalize on the advantages of living in a country which has learned to speak in two great world languages.

Such a country will be able to make full use of the skills and energy of all its citizens. Such a country will be more interesting, more stimulating and, in many ways, richer than it has ever been. Such a country will be much better equipped to play a useful role in the world of today and tomorrow.

How can we realize these aspirations? We believe that this bill is one step in that direction. It is not the first step, and, to place it in context, I shall mention some others which have been taken since the appointment of the Royal Commission under Mr. Dunton and Mr. Laurendeau in 1963.

A programme of language-training for federal public servants was started in 1964 and has since been greatly expanded to develop proficiency in both languages in those centres where it is required. The Government recognizes that its objectives in this field cannot be accomplished overnight, and that their fulfilment must not involve any prejudice to the careers of civil servants who are not bilingual and who have devoted many years of their lives to the Public Service. Nevertheless substantial progress has been made.

About 5,000 hours of language-training a day are now available for public servants. I am happy to note that a number of Members of this House have been taking advantage of these facilities.

Because we are engaged in a project that, as far as we know, is unique in the world in both size and scope, the rapid growth of this programme resulted for a period in serious problems of administration. As the demand for training has far exceeded the capacity of the system, priority has been given to training executive and administrative officers. The Government intends to expand the

language-training resources further over the next four years on a scale sufficient to meet the objectives announced by Mr. Pearson, to which I will refer in a moment. This will require an increase in the number of classrooms from 76 to 133 and an increase in the number of teachers from 175 to 339.

There is no easy way to competence in a second language but, in three and a half years, enough such competence has been acquired by many senior officials to permit both English- and French-speaking participants in conferences and committees to use their mother tongue, confident that they will be understood. We have every assurance from this experience that the objectives of the Public Service Language-Training Programme will be reached.

On April 6, 1966, Mr. Pearson made a policy announcement in this House on bilingualism in the Public Service of Canada. He stated that the Government "expects that within a reasonable period of years a state of affairs in the Public Service will be reached whereby: (a) It will be normal practice for oral or written communications within the Service to be made in either official language at the option of the person making them...; (b) Communications with the public will normally be in either language having regard to the person being served".

At that time he announced a number of measures to promote these objectives. I should like to mention the progress to date on three of them.

- (1) A salary differential has been paid since 1966 to those holding secretarial, stenographic and typist positions in which both languages are required and where both are used.
- (2) A special programme for improving bilingualism among senior executive officers was also begun in 1966. Under this programme each year some 20 English-speaking civil servants with their families spend a year in Quebec City, while some ten French-speaking civil servants and their families spend a year in Toronto.
- (3) In 1967 reasonable proficiency in the two official languages, or willingness to acquire it through appropriate training at public expense, became an element of merit in the selection of university graduates recruited for administrative trainee positions where the need for bilingualism exists.

At the end of 1967, the Laurendeau-Dunton Commission issued the first volume of its report, which made a number of important recommendations on language rights. The report stated: "We take as a guiding principle the recognition of both official languages, in law and in practice, wherever the minority is numerous enough to be viable as a group."

At the Constitutional Conference held in February of this year, the Federal Government announced that it accepted the objectives set by the Royal Commission, that it would take steps to implement the proposals applicable to the Federal Government, and that it hoped the provinces would implement those requiring provincial action. We also stated: "The Government of Canada will be prepared to help in the implementation of these proposals if we are asked to do so. We will be glad to join the provincial governments in devising the methods by which our assistance could be made most effective."

During the February meeting, the Constitutional Conference reached the following consensus on language rights:

- (1) French-speaking Canadians outside of Quebec should have the same rights as English-speaking Canadians in Quebec.
- (2) Each government should take the necessary actions in this field as speedily as possible, in ways most appropriate to its jurisdiction and without diminishing existing rights recognized by law or usage.
- (3) The Conference established a special committee to examine the Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism and other matters relating to language rights and their effective provision in practice, and to consult on methods of implementation, including the nature of possible federal assistance, and on the form and the method of constitutional amendment.

The Conference also established a continuing committee of officials which met in May, July and September and will meet again next month. They are preparing for another meeting of prime ministers and premiers which will be held on December 16 to 18.

Today's resolution describes the Official Languages Bill which will provide for the implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations which lie within the jurisdiction of Parliament. As the resolution indicates, this will include provisions to establish the status of the English and French languages as the official languages of Canada for all purposes of the Parliament and Government of Canada, and will also provide for the appointment of a Commissioner of Official Languages with the duty of ensuring recognition of the status of the two languages. It sets out for the first time the language rights of citizens in their dealings with Parliament, with the Federal Government and with federal institutions, and the duties of those institutions toward the citizen in matters of language.

We do not claim that this bill will take care of all of Canada's needs in respect of French and English or other languages. It is important to point out some of the areas to which it does not apply.

It does not, of course, amend the constitution. I have often stated my belief that such amendment is necessary to guarantee the fundamental language rights of our citizens. It does not affect provincial jurisdiction over the administration of justice or any other matter within provincial jurisdiction. It does contain an enabling provision relating to proceedings in criminal matters, but discretion is left to the courts over its implementation.

It does not regulate the internal operations of the Government. Other statutes and policy statements deal with such matters as communications between one government employee and another and bilingualism is a factor in employment.

In drafting it, we have not ignored the practical limitations of manpower and equipment. There are provisions for periods of adaptation where necessary. The bill does not require every government document to be produced in both languages in certain cases where production in one language does not violate the principle of equality of status.

Finally, in relation to languages other than English or French, the bill does not diminish any rights which Canadians may enjoy by law or custom. It does not, for example, affect the right of non-French-speaking or non-English-speaking defendants in criminal proceedings to testify in their own languages and to obtain court interpreters.

When the bill is placed before the House, I propose to discuss its objectives and its main provisions in greater detail. I shall say no more about it at this time except to commend it to the earnest attention of Honourable Members and also of the general public of Canada.

I believe that there will be widespread agreement among members and their constituents in all parts of Canada that this bill can be of the greatest importance in promoting national unity.

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