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OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT

Fortieth Anniversary

Statement by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, January 27, 2009

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition):
Honourable senators, I would like to begin by congratulating and extending a warm welcome to our 18 new senators.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Official Languages Act. The year 1969 was a historic moment in the advancement of language rights in Canada. The recommendations that appeared in the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism led to the first Official Languages Act, which officially recognized French and English as the official languages of all federal institutions in Canada.

In 1988, the Act was amended, first to ensure respect for English and French as the official languages of Canada and ensure equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all federal institutions; second, to support the development of English and French linguistic minority communities; and third, to set out the powers, duties and functions of federal institutions with respect to the official languages of Canada.

In 2005, thanks to the work of Senator Jean-Robert Gauthier, the Act was amended once again to ensure that federal institutions would take positive measures to support the

development of official language communities and to foster the full recognition and use of both English and French nationwide.

For the past 40 years, linguistic minority communities have been fighting for access to services, health care and good quality education in the official language of their choice. These communities are still working hard because, despite the government's announcement of a roadmap for linguistic duality, the actual implementation of the roadmap remains abstract.

In recent years, the government has taken a minimalist approach toward enforcement of the Official Languages Act, and language rights have been eroded. It is unfortunate that the government has been so reluctant to enforce the regulations and slow to implement amendments to the Official Languages Act.

• (1410)

There is an obvious lack of coordination in the machinery of government when it comes to official languages. After 40 years, a great deal of work still needs to be done. Positive steps need to be defined, community consultations are greatly needed and anticipated, and an overall vision must be established.

I sincerely hope that we will see this legislation fully enforced in 2009. I hope the roadmap for linguistic duality will be implemented and increase in scope. The lack of commitment and political will should, I hope, be a thing of the past.
