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LINGUISTIC DUALITY

Statement by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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THE SENATE

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[*Translation*]

LINGUISTIC DUALITY

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I rise once again here today to defend a cause I care deeply about, namely, Canada's linguistic duality and respect for the Official Languages Act.

Forty years have passed since that act was ratified — 40 years that John Ralston Saul describes as successful, with one reservation. He said, and I quote:

It is as though we have to stand up every day to talk about the fact that bilingualism works, . . . that it is important and that it is normal, and that we must go even further. We must go much, much further, and sooner or later, it is not that we become tired of it, but that it becomes tiring [because] we have to repeat the same arguments over and over, in both French and English.

Forty years of tentative bilingualism and modest progress. As the Commissioner of Official Languages indicated on Tuesday, May 26, 2009, with the release of his annual report, "We planted the seeds . . . but only a few have borne fruit."

Honourable senators, after 40 years under the Official Languages Act, why do we still have to justify the importance and the essential nature of linguistic rights, and the importance of programs to support those rights and linguistic minority communities?

There is still some lingering resistance to bilingualism. According to John Ralston Saul, it is disappointing that Canada has not normalized bilingualism. He even calls this refusal to make bilingualism normal the "Canadian illness."

Until bilingualism is normalized, francophone minority communities and anglophone minority communities, indeed all Canadians who cross the border, travel through airports, train stations and ports, all Canadian students in elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools, all Canadians who go to court, in short, all Canadians will have to fight each and every time to ensure that their right to be served, educated or tried in the official language of their choice is respected.

The Commissioner's report points to serious deficiencies in active offer of service, a lack of framework and weakened governance of official languages by this government. Bilingualism not only reflects the fundamental character of our linguistic duality, but is also enriches our society inestimably. As well, it is the first step toward multilingualism, a valuable asset in meeting the challenges of a competitive world in the 21st century.

In this multilingual world, the Official Languages Act puts Canada in a favourable position and at the forefront of cultural and linguistic integration. But the act must be implemented fully, not minimally. It is high time to cultivate respect for our language rights so that the tree can finally grow unimpeded, blossom and bear abundant fruit.
