



DEBATES OF THE SENATE

1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT • VOLUME 148 • NUMBER 181

LANGUAGE SKILLS BILL

Third Reading of Bill C-419

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, June 26, 2013

THE SENATE

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[*Translation*]

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THIRD READING

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator Carignan, seconded by the Honourable Senator Poirier, for the third reading of Bill C-419, An Act respecting language skills.

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I would like to reiterate my support for Bill C-419, An Act respecting language skills, which would make it mandatory for 10 officers of Parliament to be bilingual.

Proficiency in both official languages has become an essential skill for those in leadership roles within the federal public service. Unfortunately, the facts show that the bilingualism requirement is not always taken into consideration when appointing people to those positions. Bill C-419 rectifies that situation for 10 officers of Parliament.

The bill states that persons appointed to certain offices must be able to speak and understand clearly both official languages at the time of their appointment.

Honourable senators, I want to reiterate that English and French have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in Parliament.

I would like to thank Senator Joyal for his initiative in contacting the Commissioner of Official Languages to get a legal interpretation of paragraph 24(3)(c) of the Official Languages Act. The issue was whether, from a legal perspective, the "Office of the Auditor General" or the auditor general himself or herself had the obligation to speak both official languages. In his response, the Commissioner of Official Languages clearly stated:

...communications and services to the public are provided not only by the offices of the Officers of Parliament, but some of them can only be provided by the Officers of Parliament themselves...This interpretation is also consistent with the objective of Part IV and the principle of substantive equality, because it enables parliamentarians and the public to receive all services from offices of Officers of Parliament in the official language of their choice, including services provided by the Officers of Parliament themselves.

This is a clear interpretation based on a fundamental principle that supports the rationale behind Bill C-419.

As I stated in this chamber on June 11, 2013, the bill we are about to pass has a diminished scope and less flexibility than the initial bill, which was stripped of its preamble and two clauses. That said, the essence of the bill remains, so I am pleased to support this bill that will help protect our country's linguistic duality.