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LINGUISTIC DUALITY

Statement by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, June 14, 2017

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[Translation]

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Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, on Thursday, June 8, the Interim Commissioner of Official Languages, Ghislaine Saikaley, tabled her annual report. I commend her on tabling a very comprehensive account of the initiatives and challenges that marked 2016-17. Her opening remarks pay tribute to Graham Fraser, the former commissioner of official languages, who for 10 years was a tireless promoter and ardent defender of the Official Languages Act and its underlying values.

In her report, the commissioner states that in a survey conducted in 2016, 82 per cent of respondents supported the aims of the Official Languages Act. This level of endorsement exceeds 80 per cent in every region of Canada and shows unequivocal support for the aims of the Act.

Ms. Saikaley says that several measures taken by the federal government in 2016-17 bode well for new opportunities in official languages.

First, the Commissioner highlights two decisions made by the government in recent months: updating the Official Languages, Communications with and Services to the Public, Regulations, and improving the bilingual capacity of the superior court judiciary. She adds that the reinstatement of the Court Challenges Program announced in February 2017 is a concrete step that will have a positive impact on Canadian's ability to assert their language rights.

However, honourable senators, on reading this report, I seriously wonder about certain issues that deserve the government's immediate attention.

For example, only two out of nine recommendations have been implemented by Parks Canada since the Commissioner's audit in 2012. Field unit interpretation programs and operations are often offered only in the official language of the linguistic majority.

In October 2016, the Commissioner released a report entitled *Early Childhood: Fostering the Vitality of Francophone Minority Communities*, which included a recommendation to include a francophone component in the national framework on early learning and child care. The Commissioner also indicated that the federal government should look at how it can provide optimal early childhood development support to anglophone communities in Quebec.

The report also emphasized the importance of leadership in the public service. The number of admissible complaints filed under section 91 of the act has gone up considerably since 2015. A significant proportion of those complaints involve the linguistic profile required for a supervisory position in regions designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes.

This report contains a single recommendation. As the 50th anniversary of the Official Languages Act approaches, the Interim Commissioner of Official Languages recommends that the government assess the relevance of updating the act.

Honourable senators, as the Commissioner said, the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation is an opportunity to showcase our country's linguistic duality.
