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Title: A CAUSE FOR HOPE

No one can say that we have no plan of action. Our first editorial (february 1986) took Mr. Sibbeston to task for his cavalier treatment of the francophone community of the Territories, while recognizing his merit for offering to provide certain basic services in French more rapidly than required by the Official Languages Ordinance. Our second editorial (March 1986) was a comment on the state of the teaching of French in certain communities in the Territories.

Today, illustrating once more the concern of francophones in all matters pertaining to language, we want to discuss the Report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages. We want to state our position clearly from the start. This is an impressive report which is both factual and far reaching. There are no useless ideas in this report; it sets out concrete proposals, even though the application of these proposals risks encountering many hurdles. This report merits thorough study; to congratulate the members of the Task Force on their work is only to recognize the worth of this report.

This report cannot and must not be shelved. Our legislators must give it the time and consideration needed. It is probably the most important document ever to come before this Assembly. While awaiting the debate in the Legislative Assembly, we want to now state that we support the broad lines and fundamental principles underlying the recommendations of the Task Force.

The objective of the Task Force is to make the Territories into a bilingual society (English-French/Aboriginal Languages). The Task Force wants to secure for aboriginal peoples legislative protections which guarantee the respect of their cultures. Language and culture are inseparable throughout the report.

The mechanisms for development and protection of native cultures, recommended by the report, would be situated at the heart of the governmental machinery of the Territories. The control of the mechanisms would be in

the hands of the native peoples who are first and foremost responsible for the development and protection of native cultures. It is the duty of the whole of the northern population to support and to encourage the native peoples to exercise their rights.

The short term objective, according to the report, is to secure for native peoples government services in their mother tongues. The new official status of these languages would be a flexible concept which in some cases would give more or less rights as those given to English or French depending on the situation.

The report recommends the establishment of a Department of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, which would be assisted by two councils (Dene and Inuit) who would be responsible for policies on development and protection of aboriginal languages and cultures. This Department would be responsible for aboriginal cultural programs and in conjunction with the Department of Education, would be in charge of teacher training, thereby accelerating the training of native teachers. Two commissioners (Dene/Inuit) would promote native languages and their use and would report to the Legislative Assembly and the public respecting the progress in the application of bilingualism (English-French/Aboriginal Languages) in the N.W.T.

The recommendation respecting the establishment of a Department of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, whose head would necessarily be a person chosen by the Amerindian and Inuit members of the Legislative Assembly, is an outstanding feature of this report. This Minister would be responsible before the Legislative Assembly but only before the native members of the Assembly. This recommendation is a departure from the traditional rules of Canadian parliamentarism by establishing a Minister and a Department which have a different status from the others.

This recommendation must be studied with care. Without expressing a definite opinion on this question and despite certain dangers that may be brought about if applied, the idea is captivating. The establishment of a Department, recognized in a constitution of the Northwest Territory

would be a guarantee similar in certain aspects to the protections which Québec tried to obtain in the Canadian Constitution. Furthermore, this recommendation follows the universal movement of native peoples taking charge of their development. Can it be that only such a Department could give a jolt to a certain government inertia?

We take a different view of the establishment of two commissioners, especially since their role would be that of watch-dog, denouncing departments and governments when necessary. The real work of development would be done in the Department of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures. For the whole of the Canadian government, only one person (francophone or anglo-phone) occupies the position of Commissioner for Official Languages. Why can it not be the same here?

The Task Force recommends that the Commissioner report on bilingualism (English-French/Aboriginal Languages) in the Territories. Therefore, why not have one commissioner who would be in charge of three (3) co-ordinators who speak Dene, Inuit or French respectively, and who would be responsible respectively for the Dene, Inuit and French sectors. Such a solution would avoid the result that native peoples, who are first and foremost responsible for the protection of their cultures, be the only parties involved. Otherwise, how can it be expected that the whole of the population of the Territories be concerned with the dangers facing the aboriginal nations. Native peoples, like the francophones, must avoid the traps of sectarianism.

At times, there are certain "dossiers" which are too important to be left only in the hands of the politicians. The linguistic questions are such a case. The report made by the Special Committee of the Legislative Assembly on Education in March 1982, "Learning, Tradition and Change in the N.W.T." contained many of the recommendations found in this report on aboriginal languages, such as teacher training, languages of education, development of programs, etc... However, little has been done. This example must not be followed.

This report must not be shelved. If the native organizations, who are overworked because they have to deal with all kinds of matters, cannot bring the necessary pressures to bear, the parents must organize a lobby. Tomorrow, native children must be able to live their languages.

It is our dearest hope.