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La Présidente
CH-3003 Berne

Journée sur le plurilinguisme – Public Conference by Graham Fraser, Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada

Greeting by Christa Markwalder, President of the National Council

Bern, Tuesday 1.3.2016, 17.30 - 19.30, Bernerhof, Bundesgasse 3

Federal Councillor,
Commissioner,
Invited guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to convey to you the greetings of the Federal Assembly. I would like to extend a warm welcome to the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, and I congratulate the organisers of this event, particularly Nicoletta Mariolini from Ticino and Nicolas Grosjean from Neuchâtel.

These Italian and French-speakers remind us German-speakers, who are in the majority, that our country is founded on respect for minorities. The Swiss Confederation only really began to exist once it recognised its linguistic regions and languages: German-speaking Switzerland, French-speaking Switzerland and Italian-speaking Switzerland. In 1939 it did the same for the Romansh-speaking region.

Our linguistic regions reflect deep historical influences. They do not coincide with geographical or political borders, nor with denominational boundaries. The linguistic borders are not superimposed along lines of economic development either. The ties woven by language are of an entirely different nature.

Our Federal Constitution states that it is for the cantons to decide what their official languages should be. They also respect the geographical distribution of languages and their linguistic minorities. The law encourages them to promote exchanges between the linguistic regions,



and those cantons that are bilingual or multilingual are entitled to support. Graubünden and Ticino are called on to safeguard their minority languages.

I grew up in a bilingual canton and that without doubt contributed to my love of the national languages. The people of Switzerland have an awareness for languages and the importance of learning them. But the role of English is a bone of contention: should it come after the national languages? For the French-speaking cantons, Ticino and the bilingual cantons the case is clear, but some German-speaking cantons take a different view.

In fact while Switzerland is structurally multilingual, large sections of the public are distinctly monolingual. Some members of parliament often receive a shock when they attend committee meetings for the first time. Each member speaks in their own language, although Romance language speakers often use German to ensure that they are understood. As for the German-speakers, they have to convince their French and Italian-speaking colleagues to form majorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Of course, there is something seductive about English, the language of globalisation. But Switzerland is a nation forged through a common will and it is important that the young people of this country are capable of speaking a second national language. It is part of the richness of our exchanges and our cohesion. Someone from Zurich who reads and communicates in French has access to the vast wealth of Francophone culture; and someone from Geneva who is fluent in German feels at home by the Limmat and in the German-speaking region as a whole, especially if they have an ear for the local dialect. As for Italian, Switzerland's language of the sun, it carries us to the sea beyond the mountains.

Language is an inherent part of our being. Having the ability to communicate in the language of our neighbour expands our internal territory and reinforces our own identity. It is therefore vital that the Swiss authorities and our Parliament to set an example on multilingualism, by working, debating and producing laws in our three official languages.

Thank you.