An Excerpt From: Statement on the introduction of the Official Languages Bill, October 17, 1968

*Pierre Trudeau*

Mr. Speaker:

Many of the bills which are placed before members of this House are concerned with a specific problem, or a single occupation, or one region of the country. The Official Languages Bill is a reflection of the nature of this country as a whole, and of a conscious choice we are making about our future.

Canada is an immense and an exciting country, but it is not an easy country to know. Even under modern conditions, it is a long and expensive trip from St. Johns to Vancouver, or from Windsor to Inuvik. The great differences of geography, history and economics within our country have produced a rich diversity of temperament, viewpoint and culture.

This is easy to state, and it has been repeated in hundreds of patriotic speeches; but without the direct experience which has not been available to most Canadians, it is difficult to appreciate it fully.

The most important example of this diversity is undoubtedly the existence of the two major language groups, both of which are strong enough in numbers and in material and intellectual resources to resist the forces of assimilation. In the past this underlying reality of our country has not been adequately reflected in many of our public institutions.

Much of our political theory and tradition has been inherited from the major countries of Western Europe. It happens that the majority of these countries are relatively homogenous in language and culture. It has been practical for many of them to operate on the principle: one state, one language. For Canadian descendants of West Europeans this has often appeared to be the normal situation, subject to a few unimportant exceptions. Even today it is not unknown for a European statesman to offer advice on the future of this country based on such old-world ideas.

Looked at from a contemporary world viewpoint, it is the apparently homogenous states of Western Europe which are the exception. Many Eastern European, Asian and African states contain within a single political unit a great variety of languages, religions and cultures. In many of them this diversity is reflected in a federal system of government and in two or more official languages. In the past multicultural states have often resulted from conquest or colonialism. In the modern world many are based on a consious appreciation of the facts of history, geography and economics.

In Canada, a country blessed with more prosperity and political stability than most, we are making our choices methodically and democratically.

In all parts of the country, within both language groups, there are those who call for uniformity. It will be simpler and cheaper, they argue. In the case of the French minority, isolation is prescribed as necessary for survival. We must never underestimate the strength or the durability of these appeals to profound human emotions.

Surely these arguments are based on fear, on a narrow view of human nature, and on a defeatist appraisal of our capacity to adapt our society and its institutions to the demands of its citizens. Those who argue for separation, in whatever form, are prisoners of past injustice, blind to the possibilities of the future.

We have rejected this view of our country. We believe in two official languages and in a pluralist society not merely as a political necessity but as an enrichment. We want to live in a country in which French Canadians can choose to live among English Canadians and English Canadians can choose to live among French Canadians without abandoning their cultural heritage.

Those of us who have some experience of the difficulties and opportunities of this course are conscious of the risk. But if we are convinced that, as a country and as individuals, we must take it. French Canada can survive not by turning in on itself but by reaching out to claim its full share of every aspect of Canadian life. English Canada should not attempt to crush or expect to absorb French Canada. All Canadians should capitalize on the advantages of living in a country which has learned to speak in two great world languages.

Such a country will be able to make full use of the skills and energy of all its citizens. Such a country will be more interesting, more stimulating and, in many ways, richer than it has ever been. Such a country will be much better equiped to play a useful role in the world of today and tomorrow.

Questions:

1) What kind of audience is the speaker addressing?

2) Is he convincing?

3) Do you believe that two official languages is enriching? Explain.

5) How would you rank the importance of this speech in comparison to Che, MLK, and Faulkner?

4) Should the language of Native Peoples of Canada have the same status? Please create an argument for your opinion.