

JUSTICE FOR ENGLISH-SPEAKING QUEBECERS

QUEBEC CITY, June 11, 1999 – Mr. Justice Claude-Henri Gendreau of Quebec Superior Court is now deliberating after hearing Alliance Quebec's petition to have the Quebec government ordered to pass the plans which guarantee access to English health and social services for about 600,000 English-speaking Quebecers.

At an all-day session of the court, Alliance Quebec was represented by lawyer Guy Bertrand and President William Johnson took the witness stand. The English-rights association has gone to court as a last resort after the Quebec government broke its own law by failing repeatedly to pass revised access plans « at least every three years, » as the law requires. The last time access plans were passed by the Quebec Cabinet was in 1989.

On Wednesday, the Quebec Cabinet adopted six regional plans for providing access to English health and social services. « This is the modus operandi of the Quebec government, » observed Johnson. « The only time it acts on our rights is the week we are to see them in court. »

On Jan. 20, Guy Bertrand followed through on AQ's long-standing demand for approval of our health and social services plans. He went to court for a writ of mandamus. That is the equivalent of a demand for an injunction, requesting the court to order the government to do its duty.

As though by coincidence, just before that court appearance, Louise Beaudoin announced that eight of the 16 sets of plans developed by the regional health and social services boards were about to be approved by the Cabinet. In fact, seven were approved on Jan. 27. An eighth was approved on March 24, a week before Alliance Quebec was to appear in court to set a date for hearing the case.

Knowing that today was to be the day when the arguments of each side were to be presented before the judge, the Cabinet adopted a further six sets of plans this week, leaving two to go.

But the two remaining regions, Montreal Island and the Eastern Townships, include two-thirds of all English-speaking Quebecers. The lawyer for the Quebec government argued today that « only two » regional plans remained to be approved. But, not only does this leave the majority of English-speaking Quebecers without guaranteed plans. Other regions of Quebec also depend on arrangements with Montreal health and social services providers to supplement what they can provide locally. So the Quebec government still is far from fulfilling its legal obligations towards English-speaking Quebecers.

The proceedings today were meant to force the Quebec government to act. « We await confidently the judge's decision, » Johnson said. « Then, when it is rendered, when the Quebec government has at last passed all the access plans, we will have to consider whether the plans are adequate according to the law. For almost two years now the government's ministers have been intimidating the regional health and social services boards responsible for drawing up the plans, doing everything possible to get them to reduce the health and social services guaranteed to English-speaking Quebecers. »

On such a fundamental issue, Alliance Quebec is determined that the Parti Québécois government will not succeed in depriving us of our rights.