DO WE NEED TO KNOW OUR LANGUAGE RIGHTS?

A SURVEY OF QUEBECERS KNOWLEDGE OF CANADA'S *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT*

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In 1969, the government of Canada adopted the *Official Languages Act*. The legislation was a response to the findings of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism which in the early part of that decade reported that relations between English and French Canadians had deteriorated to a point where the two groups' will to live together was in jeopardy. Canadians were thus warned that, while they might not be fully conscious of it, their nation was perhaps passing through its greatest crisis. Efforts aimed at reconciling language and cultural difference between English and French-speaking Canadians has been a defining characteristic of the country's history. In 1969, the *Official Languages Act* was widely hailed as the most important legislative measure aimed at addressing historic concerns about minority language rights, restoring rights that had been taken away from certain minority language communities and attempting to establish a legal framework upon which to rebuild the relationship between the country's official language minorities and majorities.

One would think that this foundational law would be mentioned in the provincial history curriculum that reviews the evolution of language rights in the country or touches on relations between language groups. That, however, is generally not the case. A cursory review of the high school history curriculum in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick shows that there are no references made to the *Official Languages Act* where the issue of language arises. In the Quebec Ministry of Education's *Histoire du Québec et du Canada, Troisième et quatrième secondaire* (2017), one finds the following passage on language questions: "*Les questions nationales et celles des droits linguistiques, sur lesquels portent les projets de loi 63, 22 et 101, accaparent les actions et les débats des vingt années suivantes, les années 1960 marquant une rupture dans l'histoire du Québec*"[1].

Similarly the documentation in the province of Ontario that aims to guide high school educators in the Grade 9 and 10 program on Canadian and World Studies – geography, history, civics (politics), offers the following description: "*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. A part of the Constitution Act, 1982, the Charter guarantees Canadians fundamental freedoms as well as various rights, including democratic, mobility, legal, and equality rights. It recognizes the multicultural heritage of Canadians, and protects official language rights and the rights of Aboriginal Canadians."[2] (p 180)

For its part, the province of New Brunswick's history program in the English sector offers a detailed section on Quebec politics and instructs educators to discuss the Quiet Revolution, the October Crisis, the constitutional debates of the 1980s and the 1995 referendum, all with the laudable aim of enhancing students' knowledge of the evolution of relations between English and French Canadians.[3]

1 education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/education/jeunes/pfeq/PFEQ_histoire-quebec-canada_2017.pdf

2 www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/canworld910curr2018.pdf

3 www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/K12/curric/SocialStudies/CanadianHistory122.pdf

There are many places outside of the country's high schools to learn about Canada's *Official Languages Act* and there has been a considerable amount written about the legislation in a variety of media. In the context of this year's 50th anniversary, the legislation has been the object of ample discussion in the national media. Nonetheless, there are few studies that provide a detailed overview of knowledge about the *Official Languages Act* amongst Canadians and how such knowledge affects attitudes towards minority official language communities and knowledge of official languages. Since its inception, the *Official Languages Act* national conversations about language duality have often fallen prey to misinformation, and officials have made multiple efforts to set the record straight with for example "myth and fact" sheets amongst other responses.

The survey results below ask Quebecers to self-assess their knowledge about the *Official Languages Act* (hereafter OLA).

The findings are based on a 2019 poll conducted by the firm Léger Marketing, for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, via web panel, between August 29 and September 4, 2019, with a sample of 1,937 Quebecers which included 1,019 English-speaking Quebecers, 773 French-speaking Quebecers and 144 persons whose first language is neither English nor French.

The poll reveals that some 54% of Quebecers believe they possess a good knowledge of Canada's *Official Languages Act*. A closer look at the results of the poll indicate that only 5% feel they possess a very good knowledge, and most respondents who are purportedly 'in the know' regard their knowledge of the OLA as "somewhat good". As observed in Table 1, English-speaking Quebecers are most likely to indicate that they have a good knowledge of the OLA, but over one-third report that their knowledge is poor.

TABLE 1: HOW WOULD YOU EVALUATE YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF CANADA'S *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT*? BY MOTHER TONGUE

	Total	French	English	Other
NET GOOD	54%	55%	61%	50%
Very good	5%	4%	11%	10%
Somewhat good	49%	50%	50%	41%
NET POOR	42%	42%	36%	45%
Somewhat poor	34%	35%	27%	36%
Very poor	8%	7%	9%	10%
I prefer not to answer	4%	4%	4%	4%

Source: Léger Marketing for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, August-September, 2019

The table that follows looks at the extent to which self-assessed knowledge of the OLA facilitates the recognition of four key elements of the OLA as (1) equal status of English and French with respect to their use in institutions of Parliament and the Government of Canada; (2) Canadians benefitting from federal services in the official language of their choice; (3) ensuring the development and vitality of official language minority communities; (4) supporting the rights of official language minority communities.

As observed below, those reporting very good knowledge of the OLA are more likely to agree than others with the list of commitments that fall within the OLA. But the gaps between the self-assessed most and least knowledgeable about the OLA are not attributable to the level of disagreement with its key elements, but is rather a function of not being equipped with sufficient knowledge. The most knowledgeable are most inclined to agree that the Government of Canada enables Canadians to benefit from federal services in the official language of their choice.

Comparing the views of the Quebec's language groups around the key elements of the OLA, the province's non-Francophones are far more likely than the province's Francophones to agree that "the Government of Canada is committed to equal status of English and French with respect to their use in institutions of Parliament and the Government of Canada". There is also divergence of opinion between Francophones and non-Francophones over the extent to which they respectively believe that the Government of Canada ensures the development and vitality of official language minority communities and supports the rights of official language minority communities.

TABLE 2: EVALUATION OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF CANADA'S *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* AND RECOGNITION/AGREEMENT WITH THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT*

	How would you evaluate your knowledge of Canada's *Official Languages Act*			
Net Agree	Very good	Somewhat good	Somewhat poor	Very poor
The government of Canada is committed to equal status of English and French with respect to their use in institutions of Parliament and the Government of Canada	69.20%	57.90%	51.7%	48.3%
The Government of Canada ensures the development and vitality of official language minority communities	65.1%	47.5%	46%	40%
The Government of Canada enables Canadians to benefit from federal services in the official language of their choice	81.2%	73.6%	71.7%	66%
The Government of Canada supports the rights of official language minority communities	76.2%	60.6%	52.9%	46.9%

Source: Léger Marketing for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, August-September, 2019

TABLE 3: RECOGNITION/AGREEMENT WITH KEY ELEMENTS OF THE *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* BY MOTHER TONGUE

Net Agree	Total	French	English	Other
The government of Canada is committed to equal status of English and French with respect to their use in institutions of Parliament and the government of Canada	55%	50%	72%	70%
The Government of Canada enables Canadians to benefit from federal services in the official language of their choice	72%	70%	82%	79%
The Government of Canada ensures the development and vitality of official language minority communities	47%	42%	56%	65%
The Government of Canada supports the rights of official language minority communities	57%	52%	66%	74%

Source: Léger Marketing for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, August-September, 2019

The poll further inquired into the manner in which Quebecers would respond to an open question where asked to briefly describe how they see the main objective of the OLA. In this top of mind approach, Francophones are most likely to see the OLA's main objective as providing services in both languages, while non-francophones are more likely to believe that it aims to ensure equality between the two languages.

Amongst Quebecers, it is the non-francophone population that is most likely to agree that supporting the two official languages in Canada is an important part of what it means to be a Canadian. Still, nearly two in three Quebec Francophones agree that such support is important to what it means to be Canadian.

TABLE 4: DESCRIBE IN ONE SENTENCE WHAT YOU SEE AS THE MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* BY MOTHER TONGUE, FRENCH, ENGLISH AND OTHER

	Total	French	French	Other
Ensure that a service is provided in both languages	18%	20%	14%	11%
Ensure that a governmental service is provided in both languages	11%	12%	10%	8%
Protect/preserve both official languages	11%	11%	11%	8%
Protect the French language / keep the French language alive	9%	10%	5%	9%
Ensure the equality between the two languages	8%	7%	11%	15%
Bilingualism / promoting bilingualism	7%	7%	7%	4%
Promote/respect the two official languages	5%	4%	8%	6%
Ensure the equality/equity between francophones and anglophones / between citizens	4%	4%	4%	4%
Respecting minority rights	4%	4%	2%	1%

Source: Léger Marketing for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, August-September, 2019

TABLE 5: SUPPORTING TWO OFFICIAL LANGUAGES (ENGLISH/FRENCH) IN CANADA IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CANADIAN BY MOTHER TONGUE

For me supporting two official languages (English/French) in Canada is an important part of what it means to be a Canadian	French	English	Other	Total
Strongly agree	23.7%	53.9%	49.5%	30.3%
Somewhat agree	40.2%	33%	38.1%	38.9%
Somewhat disagree	20.2%	6.1%	5.2%	17.1%
Strongly disagree	10.6%	4.3%	6.2%	9.3%
I prefer not to answer	5.4%	2.6%	1%	4.4%

Source: Léger Marketing for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, August-September, 2019

TABLE 6: EVALUATION OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF CANADA'S *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* AND SUPPORT FOR TWO OFFICIAL LANGUAGES (ENGLISH/FRENCH) IN CANADA IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CANADIAN

For me supporting two official languages (English/French) in Canada is an important part of what it means to be a Canadian	How would you evaluate your knowledge of Canada's *Official languages Act*			
	Very good	Somewhat good	Somewhat poor	Very poor
Strongly agree	65.1%	32.2%	24.5%	22.6%
Somewhat agree	19.8%	36.4%	47.1%	31.5%
Somewhat disagree	5.7%	17.7%	17.9%	21.9%
Strongly disagree	8.5%	10.6%	7%	12.3%
I prefer not to answer	0.9%	3.1%	3.5%	11.6%
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Source: Léger Marketing for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, August-September, 2019

TABLE 7: EVALUATION OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF CANADA'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT, AND SUPPORT FOR TWO OFFICIAL LANGUAGES (ENGLISH/FRENCH) IN CANADA AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CANADIAN, BY FRENCH MOTHER TONGUE, 2019

For me supporting two official languages (English/French) in Canada is an important part of what it means to be a Canadian	How would you evaluate your knowledge of Canada's *Official languages Act*			
	Very good	Somewhat good	Somewhat poor	Very poor
Strongly agree	62.9%	26.6%	18.4%	9.5%
Somewhat agree	22.6%	37.0%	48.1%	35.2%

Source: Léger Marketing for the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Association for Canadian Studies, August-September, 2019

As observed above, the poll points to an important relationship between the assessment of OLA knowledge and the extent to which support for official languages is regarded as important to what it means to be Canadian. Those who self-assess with the highest level of knowledge are most likely to agree that supporting the two official languages is important. And, as indicated in Table 7, this is also the case for Quebecers who give themselves the highest self-assessment for knowledge about the OLA.

CONCLUSION

The results of the above analysis for Quebec suggest there is a need to better equip not only Quebecers but other Canadians with knowledge about language rights in Canada. These rights are relevant to all Canadians and knowledge about them should be fundamental not only to thickening awareness about an essential part of the country's history but also in improved understanding about the country's official language minorities.