FROM SPICER TO THÉBERGE: 50 YEARS IN THE LIFE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES AND THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES OF QUEBEC

David Johnston is Commissioner Raymond Théberge's Regional Representative in Quebec and Nunavut. He joined the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages in September of 2014, after 33 years at the *Montreal Gazette*, where he last served as editorial-page editor.

All eight of Canada's Commissioners of Official Languages over the past 50 years have had a relationship with the English-speaking communities of Quebec (ESCQ) that has been shaped by views they brought to the job and by events that took place while they were in office.

With the benefit of hindsight, what we see in the evolution of these relationships since the creation of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages in 1970 is a progressive realization that the ESCQ are a vulnerable minority – despite the growing international influence of English.

The first Commissioner, Keith Spicer, famously caused a stir in the spring of 1973 when he referred to English-speaking Quebecers as "Westmount Rhodesians." This was during a question-and-answer session in Washington, D.C., before members of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States.

> "You've got to keep running. You've got to stand up for yourself. Majorities are naturally not inclined to think very much about minorities, and so minorities need to stand up, engage, and help shape or change perceptions."
>
> – Graham Fraser

"Unaccustomed to facing such learned assemblies, the Commissioner shot from the hip and, on his return to Canada, all Hell broke loose," according to Commissioner Spicer's self-effacing 1972–73 Annual Report, released in March of 1974. "His hasty backpedalling about the term's 'affectionate' overtones convinced few, or at least not all."

It was noted in that annual report, however, that Spicer, a native of Toronto, did not coin the phrase, although care was taken not to mention who had. In fact, René Lévesque is credited with having first used the term – or rather, a variation of it, "white Rhodesians" – and not in reference to Westmount but rather to the Anglophones of his Gaspé hometown of New Carlisle. In a *Chatelaine* magazine interview published in April of 1966, while still a Lesage Liberal cabinet minister, Lévesque told journalist Hélène Pilote that New Carlisle was Quebec itself in microcosm: "New Carlisle had been populated by a handful of Loyalists who had settled there, and they kept control of all powers. They were not wicked. They treated the French Canadians as the white Rhodesians treat their blacks. They don't hurt them, but they hold all the money, and so the beautiful villas and the good schools."

Spicer otherwise never paid much attention to English-speaking Quebecers in his annual reports. His successor, Max Yalden, also a native of Toronto, explained in his own first annual report that this was because "on the whole they have fared quite well in that province."



Keith Spicer
Courtesy of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

In his 1999 book *Community Besieged: The Anglophone Minority and the Politics of Quebec*, author Garth Stevenson noted a sweeping change in Commissioner Yalden's attitude toward Quebec's English-speaking community throughout his term in office from 1977 to 1983, a change that reflected the communities' own changing vision of themselves. A lot changed in Quebec during those seven years. In 1977, Quebec passed the *Charte de la langue française*, or Bill 101, which introduced severe new restrictions (some later overturned in court) on the use and visibility of English in Quebec. Three years later, in 1980, there was the first of what would be two referendums on Quebec's separation from Canada (the second was in 1995). The years 1977-1983 also coincided with the peak of the so-called Anglophone exodus from Quebec.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT NEGLECTS ENGLISH-SPEAKING QUEBECERS

In his third annual report, Yalden chastised the federal government for what he saw as its neglect of Quebec Anglophones. And with each of his next four annual reports, Yalden came to express great dismay with the way the language issue was playing out in Quebec.

"What began as a legitimate language reform on behalf of French has deteriorated at times into something a good deal less commendable," he wrote.

Yalden's successor, D'Iberville Fortier, a native of Montreal, felt the same way. Like Yalden, he came to the job of Commissioner from the foreign diplomatic service. He was the first and still only Francophone Quebecer to hold the job of Commissioner on a permanent basis.

"It remains disturbing, from our point of view," says Fortier's 1987 Annual Report, released in March of 1988, "that the self-confidence of French in Quebec is still so uncertain that the use of Canada's other official language... must be severely limited. We trust that most Canadians can see the legitimacy of giving pride of place to the majority language of the province and of positively encouraging its recognition and use in as many social contexts as possible. But the salvation of French, in Quebec or elsewhere, must surely lie in positively asserting its own demographic weight, cultural vigour and innate attractiveness, and not in humbling the competition."

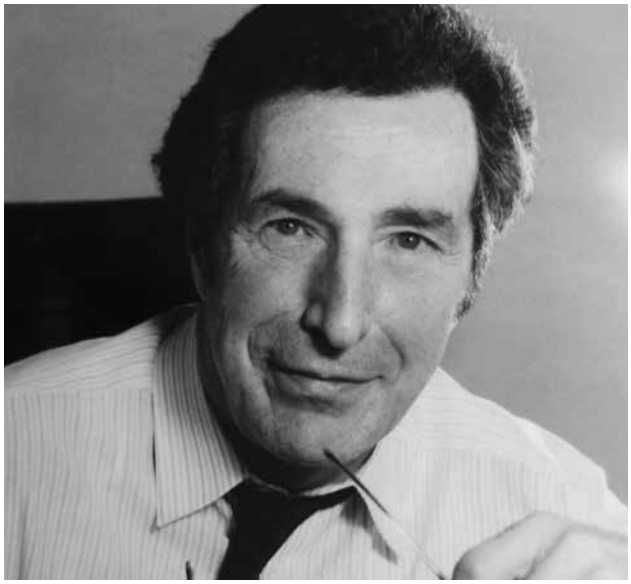
"Humbling the competition." Not since "Westmount Rhodesians" had a Commissioner of Official Languages provoked such indignation in Quebec. In Quebec City, the opposition Parti Québécois tabled a motion to condemn Fortier and his remarks. The governing Bourassa Liberals took the motion and amended it to make it even stronger, and the amended motion passed unanimously.

On the afternoon that the motion was passed, Robert Libman, a young architect from the west end of Montreal, was driving home from work when he heard CJAD radio editorialist Gordon Atkinson deliver a thunderous denunciation of the Fortier motion – and of the Anglophone Liberal members in particular who had voted in favour of it, in concert with their Francophone colleagues.

As Libman recounted in his 1995 book, *Riding the Rapids*: "I was driving my car on my way home from work, listening to Atkinson's radio editorial, and started shaking my head. Then I impulsively began to honk the horn in defiance. He had touched a nerve in me. Something had to be done to light a fire under our community and let the majority know we were fed up and not going to take it any more."



Max Yalden
Courtesy of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages



D'Iberville Fortier
Courtesy of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

It was in the aftermath of that drive home that Libman took the first steps toward the formation of the now-dormant Equality Party. In the 1989 Quebec general election, Equality had four people elected from Montreal ridings to the National Assembly, including party leader Libman and Atkinson himself. The election was held in the year after the Bourassa government invoked the notwithstanding clause to shield itself from the 1988 Supreme Court of Canada ruling on the language of commercial signage in Quebec. The court had ruled that it was unreasonable to completely ban English on signs in order to promote French. On the other hand, the court suggested bilingual signage with French as the predominant language would be constitutionally sound. The Bourassa government eventually embraced the high court's suggestion in 1993. But back in 1988, along with invoking the notwithstanding clause, the government introduced Bill 178 to prohibit any use of English on outdoor signs but while allowing some limited use on indoor signs.

FIRST AND ONLY FRANCOPHONE QUEBECER TO SERVE AS COMMISSIONER

Fortier's seven-year term ended in 1990 and he was replaced by Victor Goldbloom, the first and still only English-speaking Quebecer to serve as Commissioner. Goldbloom, a native of Montreal, went further than Fortier in his criticism of Quebec language policy. He didn't just criticize Quebec in his annual reports; he made it publicly known as well that he went to Quebec City to meet with elected officials to argue for the repeal of Bill 178. As a former Quebec cabinet minister in the 1970s, the fluently bilingual Goldbloom was known to be a Francophile, and so his interventions were not seen to have been anti-French.

"The Commissioner of Official Languages has had several encounters with ministers and officials of the government of Quebec," explained Goldbloom's 1992 Annual Report. "He has consistently expressed the view that the future vitality and security of the French language depended, not on the exclusion of English from signs, but on the quality of education and on practical measures to ensure that French-speaking Canadians can work in French everywhere in the province. He also made it clear that Bill 178 has given Quebec a negative image in the rest of Canada..."

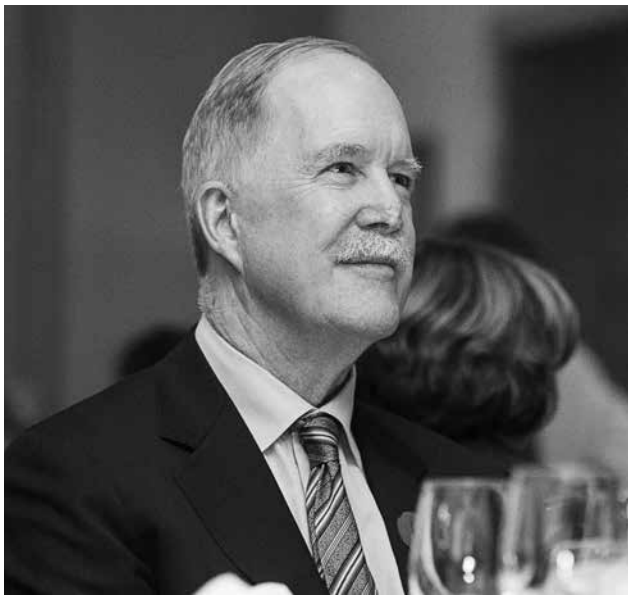
Dyane Adam replaced Goldbloom in 1999. A Francophone from Casselman, Ontario, Adam grew up in close proximity to Montreal and to Quebec and came to office with some appre-



Victor Goldbloom
Courtesy of the Quebec Community Groups Network



Dyane Adam
Courtesy of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages



Graham Fraser
Courtesy of the Quebec Community Groups Network

ciation for the similarities – and differences – between the English-speaking minority in Quebec and the French-speaking minorities outside of Quebec. She shared the concerns of most Francophones in Quebec over the fragility of French in Quebec but recognized at the same time that the English-speaking Quebecers were vulnerable. Like Goldbloom, she was not afraid to engage directly with Quebec's elected officials on matters within provincial jurisdiction affecting Anglophones. She was a strong defender of historically majority-English municipalities in Quebec whose bilingual status under the provincial *Charte de la langue française* was threatened by the Bouchard government's municipal mergers.

AFFECTION FOR QUEBEC AND THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

Commissioner Graham Fraser, although born and raised in Ottawa, was no stranger to Quebec when he replaced Adam in 2006 for what turned out to be an extended 10-year term of office. Fraser had lived and worked as a journalist in Quebec City in the late 1970s and early 1980s, first for Montreal's The Gazette and later Toronto's The Globe and Mail. In 1984, he published a book, *René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power*, that still stands today as the best English-languagea account of Lévesque's premiership. Fraser came to the job of Commissioner already held in high esteem by the Quebec political class. His affection for Quebec and for the French language was clearly evident, and it gave him a certain latitude in what he could say publicly and privately in Quebec on behalf of the English-speaking minority.

In the last half of his mandate, Fraser accelerated his efforts to try to persuade the government of Quebec to create a secretariat within the Quebec public administration for relations with its English-speaking communities. Premier Jean Charest was not keen on the idea. Neither was Premier Philippe Couillard or even his English Liberal MNAs. The MNAs repeated Couillard's contention that Anglophones were equal partners in Quebec with Francophones, and that creation of a secretariat would send the message that they were somehow second-class Quebecers.

STRUCTURE FOR LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

In early January of 2015, before the extended Christmas holidays had ended, Fraser granted an interview to a Canadian Press reporter in which he said he had failed to persuade English-speaking MNAs to change their position on the merits of a secretariat. He stated that outside of Quebec, secretariats or other formal points of contact between provincial governments and their Francophone minorities were working very well, and that Quebec should consider it.

The Globe and Mail posted the Canadian Press story online early on a Sunday morning, under the (presumably) inadvertently provocative headline of "Federal languages commissioner wants Quebec to do more to help anglophones." Sunday is a slow news day, especially just after Christmas, and as such the Globe story was picked up by just about every major Quebec media outlet. It dominated the news cycle in Quebec for an exceptional 72 hours. Two years later, as fate would have it, in June of 2017, the Couillard government announced the creation of the Secrétariat for relations with English-speaking Quebecers. MNAs praised it as an idea whose time had come.



Ghislaine Saikaley
Courtesy of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages



Raymond Théberge
Courtesy of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

In the months before he left office in December of 2016, Commissioner Fraser gave exit interviews to the editorial boards of newspapers and the electronic media. One of the images he evoked in his last meeting as Commissioner with *The Montreal Gazette* editorial board was that for members of linguistic minorities, trying to assert their place in society can feel like trying to run up a downward-moving escalator. If you stop, you go backwards. His parting message to English-speaking Quebecers was: "You've got to keep running. You've got to stand up for yourself. Majorities are naturally not inclined to think very much about minorities, and so minorities need to stand up, engage, and help shape or change perceptions."

LINGUISTIC INSECURITY

Late in Fraser's mandate, a decision was made internally at the Office of the Commissioner in Gatineau to take a fresh look at English-speaking Quebecers and the challenges that they face. The work continued through the 14 months that Ghislaine Saikaley served as interim Commissioner from December of 2016 to January of 2018 and spilled over into the beginning of the seven-year term of current Commissioner Raymond Théberge. The review identified three major challenges:

- Perception
- Linguistic insecurity
- Representational capacity

While in office, Saikaley appealed to Canadian Heritage to do more to financially support new sectoral expertise in English-speaking Quebec. The community already has sectoral infrastructure strength in education and health, but clear weaknesses in representational capacity were identified when it came to youth, seniors and women.

And while census data suggests the English-speaking community of Quebec had high rates of bilingualism, subsequent research by the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) – notably its 2009 Creating Spaces study – have shown that young people are unhappy with the levels of French-language proficiency. Nowhere in the world does an English-speaking community speak a second language as widely as the Anglophones of Quebec speak French, but the proficiency bar for French is high for meaningful participation in the Quebec mainstream.

As for perception, yes, there is still a perception, all these years after Commissioner Spicer's remarks in Washington, D.C., in 1973, that all English-speaking Quebecers are rich and live in Westmount.

PERCEPTION PROBLEM

But as Commissioner Théberge, a Franco-Manitoban, said in his first speech to QCGN at its annual general meeting in June 2018, the perception problem goes deeper than that.

"I lived in Montréal 30-odd years ago," said Théberge, "when I was a PhD student at McGill; so, I know all about the enduring stereotype of the pampered Quebec Anglophone minority living in Westmount. Nothing could be further from the truth. But as someone who grew up outside of Quebec, I can tell you that the perception problem goes much deeper than that: many Canadians outside of Quebec don't even know there's an English-speaking minority in Quebec!"

Fifty years after Commissioner Spicer took office, there is still an overriding problem of perception facing English-speaking Quebec. They have their place in Quebec, and they value their relationship with the French-speaking majority. But they have become an increasingly fragile minority that sometimes hesitates to stand up and be heard. Fraser and now Théberge have recognized this need for English-speaking Quebecers to affirm their rights, but also on a more basic level, to make themselves better known, and better understood, both inside and outside of Quebec.