OUR OFFICIAL LANGUAGES REGIME HAS PLAYED A CRITICAL ROLE IN THE SURVIVAL OF CANADA AS A COHESIVE NATIONAL ENTITY

Geoffrey Chambers, President of the Quebec Community Groups Network, has a long track record as an advocate for the preservation of the rights and institutions of Quebec's English-speaking community.

Ask any English-speaking Quebecer about language legislation. You'll very likely get a detailed, informed response about *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101) in Quebec – but not much awareness of or interest in the federal *Official Languages Act*. Here in Quebec language policy and practice are a perpetual hot topic, but the role of federal legislation is not widely understood or appreciated.

The Francophone majority population in Quebec might view the federal Act as an important mechanism to protect fragile, often fragmented French-speaking communities scattered throughout every other province of Canada. It is easy for Francophones to overlook, and often difficult for them to recognize, the need for equivalent protections for our minority English language community here in Quebec.

This is unfortunate.

Our official languages regime has played a critical – but generally underappreciated – role in the survival of Canada as a cohesive national entity. It has served as a bulwark to defend and support the English-speaking fact in Quebec. This has led many of us to take the Act somewhat for granted, and from time to time neglect this most potent tool. Our Act has quietly served as an effective support mechanism for the maintenance of our national pan-Canadian collective project.

Facing nine provinces and three territories operating entirely in English – with an unsustainable variation in New Brunswick – a Quebec operating and living 100% in French would have a very short half-life. Happily, our situation is different. Our collective national project is rooted in a commitment entered into freely over a century and a half ago that two, highly integrated but distinct communities and cultural entities embark together on a project of nationhood.

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There was not unanimous support for this undertaking then. There certainly isn't now. But, now as then, forces which

champion a parting of ways, or a redefinition of the founding principles, are in the minority. Circumstances evolve. Economic, demographic, ideological, and technological factors adjust. Nothing is unalterably carved in stone. Without a commitment to a respectful language and culture defining regime such as the one exemplified by the *Official Languages Act*, the chances for the survival of any recognizable future version of Canada would be negligible.

This is an enormous burden for any piece of legislation to carry. Our Constitution, buttressed by common law and rights-based instruments developed and refined going back all the way back to the *Magna Carta*, provides the foundational defining framework for and of our society. As grandiose as it may seem to say, here in Canada the *Official Languages Act* belongs in that category of key mechanisms which shape the way we live, work and evolve together.

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Within this conceptual framework we must include the federal government's language infrastructure stemming from the Act. As a declaration of principles and intent, the Act empowers support for official language minority communities from sea to sea to sea. With Canadian Heritage serving as the engine and successive federal Action Plans and Roadmaps providing much of the fuel, official language minority communities including our own benefit from a spectrum of policies, programs, and funding initiatives from numerous partners including Health Canada, Justice Canada, Treasury Board, and Employment and Social Development Canada, and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

In Quebec, defence of our civil liberties through litigation – with critical federal support from the Court Challenges Program – and through dialogue with provincial authorities has only been possible through the advocacy capacity in the English-speaking community underpinned by federal programs.

Virtually all of the changes and improvements in provincial language legislation over our last three generations, have flowed from the Act and its related programs. These include:

- the acknowledgement of the existence and rights of the English-speaking community in the preamble to the *Charter of the French Language*;
- the establishment of our legally enforceable right to receive Health and Social Services in English.
- literally dozens of textual amendments to that law defending the interests and rights of the English-language minority community;
- virtually all of the constitutional litigation and resulting jurisprudence – access to education, the sign law, use of English in the courts and legislature, etc.

All these achievements would have been impossible without community leadership initiatives supported by the backing of federal programs furthered by the Act.

The *Official Languages Act* has performed a vital service. It is needed.

Our undertaking now is to redesign and modernize the Act in light of what the last half century has taught us about the value and benefits of linguistic duality. We must ensure that we have all the tools to address the challenges we face today and will face over the next phase in the evolution of this inspiring, exemplary, and successful project of human civilization we call Canada.