# THE *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY OF QUEBEC

## SOME PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

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We have just celebrated the 50th anniversary of the *Official Languages Act*. At the same time, we are also about to enter into a year where the law is supposed to be modernized. The English-speaking community of Quebec needs to be deeply involved in this process. Organizations, individuals and our elected representatives.

In early 2019, I stood up in the House of Commons to oppose Bill C-420 which would have required federal civil servants in Quebec to work under the rules of the *Charter of the French Language* as opposed to the *Official Languages Act*. I stood up three times in a row, as all of my Liberal, Conservative and NDP colleagues allowed me to continue to challenge the Bloc Québécois member who proposed the private members' bill. I pointed out that this proposed change would allow federal civil servants who were English-speaking Canadians outside of Quebec to work in English, federal civil servants who were French-speaking Canadians in Quebec to work in French and federal civil servants who were French-speaking Canadians working outside Quebec in bilingual areas to work in French. The only federal civil servants who would lose the right to work in their own language were English-speaking civil servants in areas of Quebec designated as bilingual areas.

### AN UNCONSCIONABLE ATTACK

The bill was an unconscionable attack on a minority community that might have gone unnoticed by most of my colleagues, if not for my passionate interventions. As this was a private members' bill with little support among MPs, it was unlikely to ever be adopted by the House of Commons. However, it should be noted that the New Democratic and Green party MPs joined the Bloc in voting to send this Bill to committee. As a community, English-speaking Quebecers need to remain vigilant when it comes to protecting our linguistic rights. This includes at the federal level.

As someone whose roots are deeply engrained in English-speaking Quebec, I take my role as a representative of my community in Parliament very seriously. Not only do I represent everyone living in my riding, but I also know that I have a special responsibility to view every proposed law and every proposed policy from the lens of how it impacts official language minority communities. This includes the English-speaking residents of my riding, the English-speaking residents of greater Montreal and English-speaking communities across Quebec, whether in the Townships, the Gaspé, the Outaouais, the Laurentians, the Quebec City Region, the Mauricie, the Saguenay or anywhere else. It also includes French-speaking communities across Canada. Thanks to the principles of the *Official Languages Act*, which gives English and French equal status in the Government of Canada and in all the services it controls, I have a lot of ammunition to defend the rights of minority language communities.

In 2018, Mona Fortier, the Member of Parliament for Ottawa Vanier, and I were able to amend Bill C-78 to ensure that all Canadians had the right to obtain a divorce in either English

or French. We were able to do this because representatives of minority language communities were present at committee when the bill was being discussed and we were able to persuade our colleagues of the importance of these language rights. While this issue was not part of the *Official Languages Act*, we were able to argue its principles when discussing our amendment with our colleagues.

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>
> – Anthony Housefather, MP

When it came to the discussion on Bill C-420, it was critical that I was able to speak to the relevant Minister and my colleagues about the reasons that the application of the *Charter of the French Language* to the federal civil service would deeply impact not only those English-speaking Quebecers in the civil service, but also those English-speaking Quebecers expecting to receive English services from the federal government, as they are entitled to under the *Official Languages Act*.

Most outside our community are completely unaware that English-speaking Quebecers are terribly under-represented in the Quebec Civil Service. We make up about 1% of the provincial civil service despite making up more than 10% of the population. This compares to English-speaking Quebecers representing about 7.4% of the Quebec civil service back in 1941! The 1% figure has not moved since the early 1970s. While systemic discrimination and hiring policies are likely part of the issue, another important component is that many fluently bilingual English-speaking Quebecers have been loath to work in a civil service which, by law, functions entirely in French.

While we are also somewhat under-represented in some departments within the federal civil service in Quebec, we are also over-represented in others and much closer to our percentage within the general population. This is likely because English-speaking Quebecers perceive the federal civil service, which functions in both languages in bilingual regions such as Montreal or the National Capital region, as a work environment in which they feel comfortable. That would no longer be the case if the *Charter of the French Language* applied to the federal civil service in Quebec.

The Official Language Act also allows the federal government to require many positions in Quebec to be filled by individuals capable of offering the public services in both English and French. The ability to require bilingualism for positions is significantly different under the *Charter of the French Language*. As such, the adoption of Bill C-420 would have impacted English-speaking Quebecers seeking services as well.

These are the kind of issues I raise with my colleagues. I sensitize them to the reasons why we need to intervene when the Ontario Government cuts services for French-speaking Ontarians. I sensitize them to why it is important to the community in the lower Laurentians to have bilingual signs at the Lachute Hospital; why not only historic members of the English-speaking community should be entitled to receive services in English; and why it is important for all official language communities to control and manage their school boards. I see this as an important extension of my role as an MP and work closely with QCGN and other partners within the English-speaking community to make sure our voices are heard in Parliament.

## WE NEED TO WORK CLOSELY WITH GOVERMENT

We are very lucky that we currently have a federal Government and a Minister of Official Languages that are deeply committed to promoting the vitality and development of both French-speaking minorities outside Quebec and the English-speaking minority in Quebec. We need to work with the Government to ensure that, as the Official Language Act is modernized this year, its changes enhance the ability of our community to thrive.

This includes ensuring that we recognize the need for consultation with French-speaking communities outside Quebec and English-speaking communities across Quebec on issues relevant to our communities. This includes ensuring that members of linguistic minorities in the federal civil service can work in their language as much as possible and be promoted in their home provinces. This also includes providing for effective implementation of all parts of the *Official Languages Act* and ensuring that we define what positive measures the Government of Canada will take to promote official language communities across the country.

We are currently faced with a challenge. There are those who argue that there should be an asymmetric treatment of English-speaking Quebecers and French-speaking minorities outside Quebec. With the Bloc Québécois being represented on the House Official Language Committee in this Parliament, these arguments will no doubt be made. We need to be vigilant in not permitting asymmetry. We need to adapt to specific needs in each community – which may be different for English-speakers in Gaspé versus Montreal or French speakers in New Brunswick versus Saskatchewan – but we cannot ever abandon the principle that all official language minor-

ities throughout Canada must be protected equally under the *Official Languages Act*. I pledge to defend that principle loudly and clearly.

## DEMYSTIFY THE OFFICIAL LANGAGES ACT

On this 50th anniversary of the *Official Languages Act* it is important for English-speaking Quebecers to learn more about how we are protected under this law and determine how we can best use these legal protections to ensure the vitality and development of our community, both as individuals and as institutions that represent us.

I encourage you to reach out to your Member of Parliament to emphasize just how important this law is to all of us and how important it is that the modifications to the law which will soon be tabled be ones that are supported by our community. We are more than one million strong and we cannot be silent and invisible at a time when decisions which will affect our community for a generation are being made.