FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITIES – A SOURCE OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: PERSPECTIVE OF THE COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES OF CANADA

Commissioner **Raymond Théberge**[1] holds a doctorate in linguistics and has held a number of important positions at the national level, in the public service and in academia. He is the author of 20 peer-reviewed publications, three books, a bibliography and 45 research projects, all of which attest to his interest in official language minority communities. He is the author of *Demain, la francophonie en milieu minoritaire*.

As Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, I have the privilege of being the honorary co-chair of the Metropolis Francophonie Mondiale network, one of very few organizations that focuses on issues of immigration, integration and inclusion within the international Francophonie. In December 2021, at the network's inaugural conference, I had the pleasure of participating in a roundtable where we discussed how Francophone identity can be promoted in a multilingual environment. I am therefore very pleased to have this opportunity to share these words, especially since, as some of you are no doubt aware, the past few months here in Canada have been quite eventful, to say the least, in terms of official languages and linguistic duality.

As my latest annual report states, my office received "a veritable tidal wave of admissible complaints—over 5,400"[2] in 2021–2022 (a record), largely in reaction to the appointment of a Governor General who is not fluent in French and a speech given in English by Air Canada's CEO to the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal. Another subject that my office has been focusing on in recent months is the federal government's tabling of Bill C-13 to modernize the Official Languages Act. This new bill may be of particular interest to researchers because it includes new obligations to support research in French in all disciplines. Bill C-13 presents a golden opportunity to advance research conducted in French, both in Canada and internationally, and networks like Metropolis Francophonie Mondiale will have a key role to play. The increasing trend of publishing research only in English is an issue that affects Canada and other countries across the globe, and I hope that French-speaking countries around the world will work together to try to halt this phenomenon in the Francophonie and to promote research in French.[3]

In 2021, Canada celebrated the 50th anniversary of its multiculturalism policy, two years after the 50th anniversary of its official bilingualism policy. Over the past half century, these two policies have helped strengthen the Canadian

1 I would like to thank my office's research team for its contribution to this article.

2 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 2021-2022*, p. I.

3 This topic and other related challenges were discussed not only by Canadian researchers, but also by researchers from Europe and Latin America at the May 2022 Association francophone pour le savoir (Acfas) conference in the symposium called "*Entre anglicisation de la recherche et libre accès: imaginer l'avenir des revues en sciences humaines et sociales*" [Between the anglicization of research and open access: Envisioning the future of humanities and social sciences journals]. Acfas Conference, Université Laval, May 2022.

> "In 2021, Canada celebrated the 50th anniversary of its multiculturalism policy, two years after the 50th anniversary of its official bilingualism policy. Over the past half century, these two policies have helped strengthen the Canadian Francophonie (a perspective shared by many Canadians), one by affirming the language rights of the minority, and the other by encouraging diversity within a bilingual framework."

Francophonie (a perspective shared by many Canadians), one by affirming the language rights of the minority, and the other by encouraging diversity within a bilingual framework. In a public opinion telephone survey conducted by Environics for my office in 2021, 86% of respondents (and 93% of Francophone respondents) agreed with the statement that "having two official languages, instead of just one official language, sends the signal that Canada values linguistic diversity,"[4] and 68% of respondents (and the same percentage of Francophones) supported the idea that "Canada's official bilingualism policy and its multiculturalism policy work well together."[5] This shows that many Canadians, regardless of their background, seem to share my office's opinion that Canada's official bilingualism and multiculturalism policies are not only complementary, but also mutually reinforcing. This is also what second Commissioner of Official Languages Max Yalden was saying back in 1979 when he wrote that "a nation that goes to the trouble to recognize two or more official languages is implicitly committed to linguistic plurality. Far from excluding the use of other languages, recognition of official languages… is a signal to everyone of the importance to be attached to linguistic traditions and resources."[6]

Despite all of this, some Canadians still think that these two policies are difficult to reconcile and that the country's official languages actually impede its diversity. However, we often tend to forget the extent to which the French language is an essential component of Canadian diversity. Not only do Francophone minority communities help to break up linguistic homogeneity in their region, but the Canadian Francophonie is also very diverse, both in Quebec and in the other provinces and territories. Many Francophones have ancestors who were Indigenous, Irish Catholic, Scottish and even English. In the past half century, Canada's diversity has increased even more with the arrival of immigrants from across the international Francophonie (including Africa, Haiti, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Europe). Children of immigrants from all over the world attend French language schools in Quebec and elsewhere in the country. According to data from the 2016 Census, one in ten Francophones in Quebec is an immigrant. In the rest of Canada, the ratio is even higher — one in eight. In Ontario, nearly one in six Francophones is an immigrant, and in British Columbia, the number is one in four. Overall, Canada is home to over 800,000 immigrants and some 800,000 visible minorities who speak French as their first official language.[7]

The multilingualism of Francophone immigrants who settle in Canada greatly enriches the country's linguistic landscape. Although they speak French as their first Canadian official language, many of these newcomers speak other languages and come from countries where languages such as Arabic, Creole, Kirundi, Lingala or Spanish are spoken.[8] It is therefore fair to say that Francophone immigrants make a significant contribution to Canada's cultural and linguistic diversity. It is also fair to say that "diversity" and "Francophonie" are clearly not mutually exclusive.

Of course, in addition to recognizing that Francophone communities across Canada are more diverse than ever, we must also understand that these communities want to attract, welcome and support newcomers. Because of the low birth rate and the aging of French-speaking populations outside Quebec, immigration has become an essential way to ensure the vitality and maintain the demographic weight of these communities.[9] In this context, decision-makers in our country must make Francophone immigration outside Quebec a priority, and researchers must continue to study

4 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Official Languages Tracking Survey 2021 – Final Report*, p. 11.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

6 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1979*, p. 28.

7 I also highlighted this diversity in "Let's Be Honest About Multiculturalism and Official Bilingualism: Perspectives from the Commissioner of Official Languages," Multiculturalism @50 and the Promise of a Just Society, Canadian Issues, Association for Canadian Studies, Fall/Winter 2021, pp. 21–26. The statistics were provided by the research team at Canadian Heritage's Official Languages Branch and were based on data from the 2016 Census of Canada and from Statistics Canada. See also Brigitte Chavez, *Immigration and language in Canada*, 2011 and 2016, Statistics Canada, 2019, 195 p.

8 The diversity of Francophone immigration in Canada is discussed in: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, "Statistical analysis of the 4.4% immigration target for French-speaking immigrants in Francophone minority communities: Almost 20 years after setting the target, it is time to do more and do better," 2021, p. 58. See also Chavez, *Immigration and language in Canada*, 2011 and 2016.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the issue. This is why my office published a study in 2021 on the 4.4% federal target for French-speaking immigrants in Francophone minority communities. The study data shows that even if the 4.4% target had been met by the initial 2008 deadline, it still would not have been enough to stem the decline of the relative demographic weight of Francophone minority communities.[10] I am concerned about the impact of the deficits in Francophone immigration on these communities, which is why I have recommended that the federal government adopt a new target that would make it possible to re-establish and maintain the demographic weight of this population. We need to ensure that the goodwill our decision-makers have expressed regarding this issue is followed up with concrete actions in order to rectify the situation. Bill C-13 also offers an interesting solution by requiring the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to adopt a policy on Francophone immigration that includes objectives, targets and indicators. It now remains to be seen how all of this will be realized.

Given the general importance of immigration and diversity for Francophone minority communities, I am very much looking forward to the results concerning language from the 2021 Census of Population conducted by Statistics Canada — results which, at the time of writing, should be released shortly. I am particularly interested in seeing the data on the questions about language of schooling, which will tell us how many immigrants and children in exogamous families go to French-language school in Canada. I am also looking forward to reading the new Survey on the Official Language Minority Population, a post-census survey that focuses specifically on the situation of official language minority communities.

I would like to conclude by stating that here in Canada, our official languages and multiculturalism policies ensure that English and French are the two languages of integration in our society. Newcomers to Canada are encouraged to enrich our diversity by preserving their languages and cultures, but French is truly one of the two languages that make up the national dialogue and belong to all Canadians, regardless of their first language or country of origin. In other words, French is one of the two languages of public life in Canada. The presence of French in Canada helps us to build bridges not only between Canadians — regardless of whether they were born in Canada or elsewhere, or whether French is their first or second (or even their third or fourth) language — but also with the international Francophonie. Like the other members of the International Organisation of La Francophonie, Canada is a multilingual country, but through French, all of these countries can communicate with each other. Everything considered, the fact that French — one of the most widely spoken languages in the world — has official status in Canada is an undeniable advantage and, to quote from my office's public opinion survey, "is positive for Canada's international image."[11]

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10 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

11 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Official Languages Tracking Survey 2021 – Final Report*, p. 8.