CANADA'S BILINGUAL EDUCATION REVOLUTION: THE B&B COMMISSION AND OFFICIAL LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION

MATTHEW HAYDAY is associate professor of Canadian history at the University of Guelph. He is the author of numerous articles on the history of Canadian language policy and the book *Bilingual Today, United Tomorrow: Official Languages in Education and Canadian Federalism*. He is currently writing a history of the promotion and reception of bilingualism in English-speaking Canada since the 1960s.

ABSTRACT

In most key respects we are still living in the B&B Commission-inspired era in the field of education. The right of the two official language minorities to educate their children in their mother tongue, as pushed for by the commission, has now been guaranteed under the constitution where there are sufficient numbers of students to warrant this education, a provision the courts have interpreted quite generously. The state of official languages in education is certainly not perfect in Canada. However, the state of the field of education has been so radically altered since the creation of the Royal Commission in 1963 that one would be foolish to focus solely on the ongoing weaknesses in the system. The entire conception of how minority language education should operate – and that it should be considered a right – has shifted 180 degrees over the past half century.

Fifty years after the creation of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, it is certainly fair to say that many of the hopes attached to the Commission's work remain unfulfilled. While progress has been made in terms of federal government services being offered in both official languages, it remains true that the default working language of many government departments continues to be English, and that many francophones feel compelled to speak in English with their supervisors and in meetings in order to be properly understood. The 1971 adoption of a policy of multiculturalism was, in many respects, a rejection of the vision of an officially bicultural Canada promoted by B&B Commission co-chair André Laurendeau and many other French-Canadians. And one must certainly use qualifiers if one wishes to speak of Canada as a bilingual country; the vast majority of Canadians remain unable to carry on a conversation in both official languages. However, while acknowledging these and other limitations, it is important to give credit to the major strides that have been made in Canada as a direct result of the Commission's work. Arguably, this is most evident in the sector of education, where the recommendations of the commission led to a dramatic shift in both official minority

language education and second language instruction. Moreover, the policies and programs resulting from the commission's work gave rise to actors in both government and civil society who have been able to promote and advance the cause of enhanced official languages programs in education over the past five decades, leaving behind a radically transformed education sector.

Consider the state of Canadian education in 1963. Quebec, alone of the provinces, offered a full gamut of educational programs from kindergarten through to university in both English and French. Indeed, prior to the Parent commission-inspired educational reforms, its minority English Protestant system was better funded than its French Catholic one. In the rest of Canada, the situation for official language minorities seeking instruction in their mother tongue was pitiful. In New Brunswick, the Acadian communities, who accounted for one-third of the province's population, were ill-served by underfunded publicly-run "bilingual schools" that gradually phased out French language instruction as students advanced through the grade levels. After the softening of the punitive Regulation 17 in 1927, Ontario had a system of French-language elementary schools but no publicly-funded French-language secondary education. As one headed further east or west, the situation got worse. Manitoba and Alberta, for instance, only permitted one hour per day of French language instruction. English-speakers who wished to learn French as a second language could take courses in the elementary and high schools of many provinces, but curriculum reforms of the 1960s were starting to eliminate mandatory second language course requirements – a development welcomed by many who observed that these courses failed to produce significant second-language competency in most students.

While a causal connection is difficult to prove definitively, it is nonetheless true that the period of the B&B Commission's tenure was one in which language rights, particularly in the education sector, were brought to the forefront of Canadian public debate. Aware of the climate of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, many provincial governments and school boards began to alter their practices in the language sector. In the mid-1960s, school boards in Montreal and Saint-Lambert pioneered French immersion programs, while the privately run Toronto French School (founded in 1962) expanded its French programming for English-speaking schoolchildren. Many provinces began the process of undoing decades-old restrictions on French-language education for francophone students. New Brunswick radically altered the structure of its education system, providing centralized funding to a province-wide system of English-language, French-language and bilingual school districts. In 1967, Ontario Premier John Robarts announced his intention to provide funding to French-language public secondary schools, and delivered on this promise in 1968. By 1968, the Prairie provinces had adopted permissive legislation for schools that wished to provide 50% of their instruction in French, and Nova Scotia had created an advisory committee on Acadian education. These changes, a sampling of what was underway, did not go as far as many francophone community associations were requesting in their submissions to the B&B Commission, but nevertheless represented a significant shift in the approach of English-majority provinces to French-language education.

The first two reports of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, released in 1967 and 1968, included several key recommendations that would ultimately have major impacts on the education sector. Volume I, on the official languages, is of course known for its recommendations that the federal government adopt English and French as Canada's two official languages, adopt an official languages act, provide services in both official languages (initially supposed to be governed by a system of bilingual districts, which was ultimately abandoned in 1976 [see Bourgeois 2006]), and create an officer of Parliament, the Commissioner of Official Languages, with a mandate to investigate the government's adherence to the official languages policy (RCBB, Volume I, 147-149). In this volume, the Commissioners also argued that Canadian parents should have the right to have their children educated in the official language of their choice and that this should be recognized in the educational systems, dependent on the concentration of the minority population.

Volume II targeted the issue of education squarely on. Recognizing the crucial nature of mother tongue education for community vitality, the Commissioners boldly recommended that the federal government assume the responsibility for covering the additional costs that the provinces would encounter in providing education in the minority language (RCBB, Volume II, recommendation 26). This recommendation came despite the provinces' constitutional jurisdiction over

education, because "[f]rom a national perspective… minority lan-guage schools are essential if Canada's bilingual and bicultural nature is to be confirmed." (RCBB, Volume II, 192-3). Moreover, the commissioners believed that enhanced second-language capacity in Canada's population would enhance cultural understanding of the other *official language group*, while also fulfilling the practical need for more bilingual Canadians to make an official languages policy practicable. They therefore recommended that the study of the second official language should be made obligatory for all students in Canadian schools. (RCBB, Volume II, recommendation 31).

At the time of the release of the B&B Commission's report on education, the federal government was preparing what would become the Official Languages Act, 1969, which would also lead to the creation of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Keith Spicer was the first person named to this position. It was also in the midst of trying to negotiate the patriation of the constitution, and thus there were ongoing federal-provincial committees discussing, among other issues, the question of language rights in the federal government's proposed Charter of Rights, which would become part of the (ultimately failed) 1971 Victoria Charter. These provided venues for the B&B Commission's recommendations on official languages education to be discussed and debated.

The federal government generally accepted the thrust of the Commission's recommendations, and indicated its willingness to fund, via the Secretary of State, both minority language education and second language instruction. By 1970, the federal government and the provinces had agreed upon a five-year funding program to promote bilingualism in education (as it was called at the time). Ottawa would contribute a percentage of the provincial cost of educating students in the minority official languages, and also the teaching of the second official language to the majority language students. This funding would be available to ongoing programs (so as not to penalize provinces that already were offering such education), but was primarily intended as an incentive to provinces to expand their program offerings by offsetting these costs. The Bilingualism in Education Program (as it was known until 1979) was expanded in 1972 to encompass special initiatives for universities offering minority language education programs and teacher training, the creation of language training centres, second-language teacher training bursaries, and shared-cost special projects. Beyond the ambit of this program, in 1971 the federal government began funding the Summer Language Bursary Program for students who wished to undergo an intensive immersive experience in their second language during the summer months. In 1973, the Official Language Monitors Program was created so that minority language students could work as teacher aides for second-language students. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), administered these two programs.

Although initially envisioned as a program to provide short-term incentive funding to develop the official languages in education, the Bilingualism in Education Program has been renewed every three to five years, and was renamed the Official Languages in Education Program (OLEP) in 1979. In its first fifteen years of operation, over $1.5 billion was provided to the provinces. The program resulted in many of its desired goals. Over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s, most provinces dropped their restrictions on French mother-tongue education, and developed provincial structures to develop and support these programs. Federal funding was also channelled towards expanding elementary school French-as-a-second-language (FSL) programs. Perhaps most significant in the second-language sector was explosion of French immersion programs, which proliferated across the country, aided in large part by the federal grants, which funded these programs at the same (higher) level as it did minority language education. Quebec, despite restricting access to its English language educational programs, maintained them for its minority language community. (Hayday 2003) As of the present date, over $7 billion has been spent under the auspices of the OLEP. The Second Language Bursary and Official Language Monitors Programs continue to operate today, although renamed in 2004 as the Explore and Odyssey/Odyssée programs.

The creation of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, the federal ombudsman for the *Official Languages Act*, had surprising consequences for the education sector. Although his primary mandate was to investigate complaints against the federal government for its implementation of the Act, the first Commissioner, Keith Spicer took a pro-active approach to trying to prevent such complaints from arising in the first place. This entailed making recommendations to the government on how to strengthen its approach to language policy. Witnessing some of the failures and weaknesses

of the federal government's efforts to train unilingual civil servants in their second language, he proposed a "youth option" in his Fifth Annual Report. This entailed shifting the focus of language policy to effective language education for children, so that they would grow up to become bilingual adults, able to fill the government's need for bilingual staff. More broadly, the youth option would also foster cultural understanding and interest between the country's two largest language groups, an objective he had been articulating since his first report.

In addition to advising the federal government to invest in this course of action, Spicer took advantage of opportunities to promote this ideal in his public communications and media interviews, thus conveying similar messages to the provinces and the CMEC. Working with his office's modest budget, Spicer developed educational kits and posters aimed at Canadian schoolchildren designed to foster interest in language learning, an approach emulated by his successor, Max Yalden. In the final year of his term, Spicer played convenor to a conference of parents interested in expanding French-second language learning opportunities for their children. The conference led directly to the founding of Canadian Parents for French (CPF), a national advocacy group that continues to be a leader in the promotion of French Immersion and FSL to this day. Yalden, in addition to having his office support CPF's efforts to mobilize communities in support of expanded language learning opportunities, also became keenly engaged in promoting student exchange programs and urging universities to expand their second language programmes.

One might arguably also draw a connection between the B&B Commission, the federal funding programs it spawned, and the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982. More specifically, the inclusion of minority language education rights in section 23 was a development that would have been unthinkable prior to the B&B Commission. The new discourses around language education rights and the funding that encouraged provinces to start creating official language minority classes and schools arguably went a long way to convincing the provincial governments to accept the inclusion of this clause in the Charter, and also to agree that this clause would not be subject to the notwithstanding clause (section 33). As many scholars have noted, this section of the Charter then provided leverage for francophone minority communities to win the right to school governance through the courts over the course of the following two decades (Martel 1991, Behiels 2004, Martel & Pâquet, 2012).

In most key respects we are still living in the B&B Commission-inspired era in the field of education. The right of the two official language minorities to educate their children in their mother tongue, as pushed for by the commission, has now been guaranteed under the constitution where there are sufficient numbers of students to warrant this education, a provision the courts have interpreted quite generously (see the case of Summerside, PEI, for example: *Arsenault-Cameron v. Prince Edward Island*, [2000] 1 S.C.R. 3). Subsequent Commissioners of Official Languages, right up to the current Commissioner, Graham Fraser, continue to be keen advocates for federal funding and provincial provision of official languages programming in education and opportunities for student exchange programs. Federal dollars still flow to the provinces to maintain and expand minority and second official language education. And although there are certainly problems with the French immersion programs in the country – a supply of qualified teachers, for example, often being a significant concern – there is still tremendous demand for these programs. Rarely does a year go by where there is not news coverage of one Canadian school board or another whose capacity to provide enough spaces for the students seeking admission is being sorely tested. Arguably, even these periodic failures of the system to meet demand provide evidence of a kind of the success of the B&B Commission's legacy of stimulating Canadians' desire for quality education in their second official language.

The state of official languages in education is certainly not perfect in Canada. Critiques have been levied at Canada's FSL and French immersion programs in terms of the language capacities of their graduates, and similar concerns have been raised about the quality of English instruction in Quebec's French-language schools. Recalcitrant school boards and provinces have sometimes had to be forced by court action to provide minority language education and minority school governance. Canadians, by and large, still tend to be able to speak only one of the two official languages. However, the state of the field of education has been so radically altered since the creation of the Royal Commission in 1963 that one would be foolish to focus solely on the ongoing weaknesses in the system. The entire conception

of how minority language education should operate – and that it should be considered a right – has shifted 180 degrees over the past half century. Second language instruction, while not mandatory in many jurisdictions, has also often increased substantially in terms of quality and intensity for those parents and their children who seek this option. What remains now is to build on these foundations, fund these programs adequately, and invest resources in the dimensions of these programs that can lead to future improvements.

REFERENCES

Behiels, Michael. *Canada's Francophone Minority Communities: Constitutional Renewal and the Winning of School Governance*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.

Bourgeois, Daniel. *Canada's Bilingual Districts: From Cornerstone to Tombstone*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.

Hayday, Matthew. *Bilingual Today, United Tomorrow: Official Languages in Education and Canadian Federalism*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003

Martel, Angéline. *Official Language Minority Rights: From Instruction to Management*. Ottawa: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1991.

Martel, Marcel & Martin Pâquet. *Speaking Up: A History of Language and Politics in Canada and Quebec*, trans. Patricia Dumas. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2012.

Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Volume I: The Official Languages. Ottawa, 1967.

Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Volume 2: Education. Ottawa, 1968.d'information sur le sujet.