FOREWORD: THE B&B COMMISSION – 50 YEARS ON

MAXWELL YALDEN received his BA at the University of Toronto, and M.A. and PhD at the University of Michigan. He joined the Department of External Affairs in 1956 and was posted to Moscow, Geneva and Paris, as well as serving in various capacities in Ottawa. He was appointed Assistant Under-Secretary of State in the Department of the Secretary of State in 1969, and subsequently Deputy Minister of Communications in 1973. In 1977 he became Commissioner of Official Languages for a term of seven years. In 1984 he was appointed Ambassador of Canada to Belgium and Luxembourg. In 1987 he became Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. In 1996 he was elected to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, and reelected in September 2000. Mr. Yalden is a Companion of the Order of Canada, and Commandeur de l'Ordre de la Pléiade. He has been awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Ottawa and by Carleton University.

ABSTRACT

My purpose in the pages that follow is to offer a brief assessment of what the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was up to; its major achievements and shortcomings; and the progress of language reform in this country, in the light of its analysis of the problem and its recommendations for resolving some of its salient elements. The Report was no less than a remarkably thorough analysis of a significant aspect of our national identity, and moreover one in which the commissioners attempted to recommend a course of action for remedying its major weaknesses.

INTRODUCTION

Half a century ago, one of the first acts of the newly elected government of Prime Minister Lester Pearson was the establishment of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, better known as the B&B or Laurendeau-Dunton Commission.

The creation of the Commission was a farsighted decision on Mr. Pearson's part, but it turned out to be more than that. In the end, its recommendations and their aftermath were to have a substantial effect on Canadian politico-social life that undoubtedly went far beyond what he and his colleagues could have anticipated.

The contributors to this special edition of "Canadian Issues" explore a range of the Commission's activities and recommendations. They provide a critical examination of their strengths and weaknesses; the policies adopted by governments in response; and the impact on the Canadian identity that have emerged from developments since 1963.

My purpose in the pages that follow is to offer a brief assessment of what the Commission was up to; its major achievements and shortcomings; and the progress of language reform in this country, in the light of its analysis of the problem and its recommendations for resolving some of its salient elements. My perspective is that of one who was involved with these issues for more than thirty years. My involvement included principally participation in the development of language policy as a senior government official, and monitoring the progress of language reform as Commissioner of Official Languages.

When I left the Department of External Affairs (as it then was) in the late 1960s, to join the Secretary of State's Department, (now the Department of Canadian Heritage), with responsibility for official languages programs, the process was already underway. The Commission had criss-crossed the country, hearing all manner of views on language problems and related matters, some of which – opposition to the "two founding peoples" idea in the west, for example, or incipient separatist views in Quebec – surprised and even shocked members of the Commission.

A "Preliminary Report" had been published in 1965, in which the commissioners asserted their conviction that the country was passing through "a crisis" of which many Canadians were not even aware; and affirmed their belief in the fundamental importance of recognizing the "two founding peoples" approach to social and linguistic realities in Canada. And two books of its six-part final report – on official languages and education – had also appeared. Pierre Trudeau had replaced Mr. Pearson as Prime Minister; he had emphasized his firm commitment to language reform; and had set officials to work drafting government responses. Further reports were in train in 1969 and 1970 – on the work world, the "other ethnic groups", and the federal capital and voluntary associations. All in all, a massive attempt was in the works to identify and remedy what the Commission perceived as significant lacunae in Canada's language policy and the treatment of its two major linguistic minorities.

THE ORIGINS OF THE B&B COMMISSION

One of the first suggestions for the creation of a royal commission came from the then editor of *Le Devoir*, André Laurendeau, backed up with support from francophone colleagues of Mr. Pearson. They were deeply concerned by the highly unsatisfactory situation of the French language and the francophone minority in Canada, and believed that a thorough investigation of the problem was long overdue.

On this basis, Prime Minister Pearson went ahead. The B&B Commission came into being, with a mandate to

> *report upon the situation and practice of bilingualism within all branches and agencies of the federal administration;*
>
> *report on the role of public and private organizations, including the mass communications media, in promoting bilingualism ... and the basic bicultural character of our country and of the subsequent contribution made by the other cultures;*
>
> *discuss with the provinces the opportunities available to Canadians to learn the English and French languages, and to recommend what could be done to enable Canadians to become bilingual.*

The co-chairmen of the Commission were André Laurendeau and Davidson Dunton (then President of Carleton University), with Laurendeau replaced on his death by Jean-Louis Gagnon, one of the commissioners. They were joined by eight others from various parts of the country. It is perhaps worth noting, from the perspective of another generation, that only one was a woman (Mrs. Gertrude Laing of Calgary), and that all were white, although some semblance of ethnic diversity was observed through the presence of Mr. Jaroslav Rudnycyj of Winnipeg and Mr. Paul Wyczynski of Ottawa.

The result was more than seven years of labour, and a total of 150-odd recommendations. Further, the federal government's responses were virtually unprecedented in the history of royal commissions, as to the completeness of their treatment of the Commission's recommendations, and the high proportion of acceptance of those that were within its jurisdiction.

It is also worthy of note that there was a substantial degree of opposition support in Parliament for much of what the government was doing. With the exception of a few of Mr. Diefenbaker's supporters, the Official Languages Act, for example, passed the House of Commons in 1969 with the endorsement of all parties. It should also be emphasized that improvements to the Act were later adopted by Prime Minister Mulroney's Conservative government in the 1980s.

THE B&B RECOMMENDATIONS AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS

Before turning to a review of their recommendations, it will be worthwhile to look briefly at some of the Commissioners' fundamental assumptions.

First, they made it plain that, in their view, language reform meant "institutional", not "individual", bilingualism. In other words, governments were to provide service in the preferred language of the citizen; by and large, individual Canadians would not be required or expected to become bilingual.

Second, they adopted the "personality" rather than the "territorial" approach to bilingualism. In plain language, this meant that members of a linguistic minority would receive service in their language wherever "their numbers warranted". It did not mean that the country would be "bilingual", in the sense of being divided into distinct unilingual territories, as is the case, for example, in Belgium.

We must also recognize, of course, that they were talking about two official languages, no more. Thus, although there was some dissent on the part of one or two commissioners, there was no intention to assess the situation of other languages spoken in Canada.

And finally, attention to the aboriginal peoples and their languages was entirely lacking. "Our terms of reference", as the commissioners put it, "contain no allusion to Canada's native populations". Nevertheless, they did believe that the authorities should recognize that "everything possible must be done to help the native populations to preserve their cultural heritage" and to assist the survival of the most common languages.

With these two principles underpinning their work; with the exceptions I have just mentioned; and always bearing in mind the importance they attached to "an equal partnership between the two founding races", the way before them was clear. Their recommendations, to which I can give only brief attention, were developed at great length.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First of all, they proposed that the British North America Act (then Canada's constitution) should be amended to provide (section 93) for minority-language education; and that the provisions of section 133, with respect to the use of English and French in the federal and Quebec legislatures and courts, should be extended to apply to New Brunswick and Ontario.

They further recommended that the federal government should enact an Official Languages Act, providing for equality of status of the two official languages, English and French, and appoint a commissioner of official languages; and that the provinces of New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario should do likewise.

On matters of governance, they proposed the establishment of "bilingual districts" (with a minority-language population of 10% or more). In those districts, and in the National Capital, service to the public should be provided in both official languages.

With regard to education, the commissioners recommended that minority-language education should be provided in bilingual districts, in the National Capital, and elsewhere, "where practicable", for example in major urban centres. The federal government should defray the additional costs entailed in providing this service. Second language instruction should be "compulsory" in Canadian schools.

As regards the work world, "French Language Units" should be created in the federal public service and the armed forces, with French as the language of work. In the private sector in Quebec, French should be the principal language of work.

As to the "other ethnic groups", fair employment and human rights legislation should be extended and should be monitored by full-time commissions. Conditions for citizenship, the right to vote and stand for office should be the same for all individuals. Private schools teaching in languages other than English and French should continue, but there should be no generalized program of public financing for such schools.

The final book of the report, dealing with the federal capital and voluntary associations, recommended that all services should be "freely available" in both languages in the National Capital. No formal recommendations were made with respect to voluntary associations, but the importance of equal partnership, language reform and cultural sensitivity was emphasized.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Government reactions to all this came forward with remarkable speed, considering the enormous scope of the terrain covered by the report.

Beginning with the constitution, an attempt was made as early as 1971, at Victoria, to entrench language rights, which did not succeed at the time, essentially because of Quebec's unwillingness to accept the overall Victoria package. Negotiations continued, however, and minority-language education was provided for in the 1982 Constitution.

New Brunswick has been declared a 'bilingual province,' whereas Ontario and Quebec have not.

As to legislation, a federal Official Languages Act was enacted in 1969, and subsequently amended in 1988 and 2005. New Brunswick also adopted an Official Languages Act; Ontario passed a French Languages Services Act; and Quebec adopted legislation establishing French as the official language of the province.

Federal and New Brunswick commissioners of official languages were appointed; Ontario appointed a commissioner of French language services, who reports to a minister rather than being directly responsible to the legislature; no similar action was taken by the other provinces.

In the matter of government administration, no federal bilingual districts were established. Services are, however, provided in certain of these regions, at the federal, provincial and municipal levels.

Minority-language education is available across the country. Federal subsidies are also provided. Minority-language education at the postsecondary level is accessible in several provinces. Generally speaking, second-language instruction is not a compulsory subject. Federal assistance has been provided, but the administrative structures envisaged by the commission were not created. There are private exchange programs, some of them at least partially subsidized by public funds.

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With respect to the work world, no French Language Units were created, although similar entities were established, with mixed results, in both the federal public service and the armed forces.

Under Bill 101, French is the language of work in Quebec in most cases, although it remains a mixed language regime in others, especially where contact with business or industry outside Quebec is frequent.

With regard to other ethnic groups, fair employment and human rights legislation exists in all provinces, and is monitored by full-time commissions or specialized agencies. Appropriate legislation has been adopted at the federal level as well. Human rights commissions operate at both federal and provincial levels.

Conditions for citizenship, and the right to vote and stand for office, are the same for all individuals both federally and provincially.

Private school subsidies continue, though not equally in all provinces. "Indirect press subsidies" are also maintained. According to the CRTC, Canada's broadcasting system provides several third-language programs, on both radio and television

With respect to the national capital, no legislation creating English and French as "official languages" has been adopted by the provinces of Ontario or Quebec, or the municipalities of Ottawa or Gatineau. However, many services are provided in both languages. No tripartite interprovincial agency has been created to ensure coordination.

Finally, as regards voluntary associations the federal government has offered subsidies for interpretation and translation to various voluntary associations.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

We must now ask ourselves what has been accomplished. The contributors to this volume will review these issues in some detail. I wish only to offer a few observations of a general nature.

Is Canada now a "bilingual country"? The answer is "yes and no". Yes, governments provide services in the two official languages far more effectively – and willingly – than was the case in the past. Even in Quebec, where the Bill 101-inspired regime prevails, such services are available to a degree in both the public and private sectors. No, however, with regard to individual bilingualism. Immersion schooling has had a salutary affect; and young people are more bilingual than their elders were. But there is no question of Canadians being bilingual from coast-to-coast and there is not likely to be. But then, as I have pointed out, it never was the Commission's intention that they should be.

Were the goals of the B&B Commission realistic? Again, yes and no. They were, to a degree, subject to the problems of all royal commissions: prolixity and "mission creep". On the whole, however, it was reasonable to set out the whole convoluted problem; and this could hardly have been accomplished in a more compact form. Moreover, they had the advantage of publishing their half-dozen reports over a period of as many years, which provided sufficient time for a considered response.

The proposals put forward by the commissioners were on the whole both reasonable and practicable. They never expected that the two main linguistic communities could "enjoy … advantages … throughout the country on an equal footing." In other words, the ideal had to be tempered with realism, and identical treatment for both groups was not feasible. Even less was genuine individual bilingualism. Thus, whatever the shortcomings of the commission's recommendations, the superficial argument that "bilingualism has failed" because such objectives were not met is simply to misunderstand what was intended.

Were the commissioners successful in marrying the notion of two official languages with that of "no official culture", as Prime Minister Trudeau put it in 1971? An element of "yes", to be sure; but perhaps with more of a leaning toward "no", in that they found it difficult to put aside their two-founding-peoples approach, which after all was incorporated in their terms of reference and regarded by them as fundamental, at least at the beginning. It is true that they made an effort in this direction in their treatment of "the other ethnic groups" and in diverging somewhat from a dualistic perspective after the death of André Laurendeau. However, it can be argued that they never showed evidence of genuine conviction, and certainly not enough to convince critics in western Canada.

What about the virtual omission of any consideration of the aboriginal peoples? It is obviously the case that they were given no substantial consideration in the report. But

the commissioners rightly observed, as I have also noted above, that their terms of reference made no mention of native peoples. And it is equally clear that they had their work cut out for them with the language issue, without venturing into another difficult and complex area. The huge exercise involved and the massive report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 20 years later, is proof enough of that.

Finally, it has been asked whether the report of the Commission had an important impact on Canadian identity. Here, the answer must surely be in the affirmative. In so far as royal commission reports ever have an impact, the B&B report must be counted among them. Government responses clearly affirmed that it influenced their actions in the area of official languages; subsequent approaches to constitutional reform, legislation, and governmental policy all bore this out. And with them, Canadians' perception of the nature of their identity also changed. One obviously cannot establish a direct cause-effect relationship, but I believe the case for the significance of the Commission's report in this context is clearly established.

CONCLUSIONS

One can of course conclude that the B&B report made a significant contribution to Canadian life without necessarily approving or disapproving of the results of their work. Whatever one may of think of the latter, however, I believe it has to be agreed that the report represented a comprehensive assessment, historically and legally, of Canadian politico-linguistic practices at the middle of the 20th century. It was no less than a remarkably thorough analysis of a significant aspect of our national identity, and moreover one in which the commissioners attempted to recommend a course of action for remedying its major weaknesses.

Many of the problems that are sometimes attributed to the language reform program that was subsequently devised resulted from government action – or more accurately, inaction – rather than lacunae in the Commission's analysis or recommendations. To take only one example, the proposed bilingual districts, so dear to the Commission's heart, were never created, largely because the federal government could not rid the provinces of the idea that they were in some sense a Trojan horse that would be used to introduce *provincial* districts requiring provincial services in those areas.

At the same time, there were undoubtedly weaknesses in the report, both of conception and of presentation.

To illustrate, as a matter of conception, the proposed French language units were both too bureaucratic and not enough cognizant of the human difficulties they could entail. Creating entities in which individuals would work entirely in French and communicate with other administrative units in that language may have looked good to the commissioners on paper. In practice, however, it was widely felt that they could end up establishing what would amount to linguistic ghettoes, with all that that would entail for the careers of the persons involved.

With respect to presentation, as basic an idea as institutional bilingualism (as opposed to individual bilingualism) never really came across to ordinary citizens. Many of them simply could not believe that it would avoid a situation in which French would be "shoved down their throats". And to a degree, the more the commissioners or the government tried to explain, the less convincing they were.

All in all, however, while these and other shortcomings cannot be dismissed out of hand, they are inconsequential when taken in the context of the overall import of the report. The results to which it led and the achievements that flowed from it have been very considerable, perhaps more than in any other country in the western world, with fewer problems and more political peace than many would have expected.

In a word, I think we may conclude that the process of language reform in Canada is here to stay, even if it may have lost some of the thrust that characterised it at the beginning. What was begun by the Royal Commission created by Lester Pearson in the early nineteen sixties and carried on by Pierre Trudeau and successive political leaders, Liberal and Conservative, is now deeply embedded in our constitution, our laws, our administration, our schools, our cultural institutions, and even in the daily life of many of us. I have remarked above that in matters like these one cannot readily establish cause-effect relationships. But what has been achieved is not likely to have come about without the Royal Commission. This, I believe, may be regarded as a fair statement of its legacy to Canadians.