THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM, 50 YEARS LATER

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ABSTRACT

The Royal Commission played a critical role in bringing to the forefront the state of mutual incomprehension between French-speaking and English-speaking Canada. The key question was the one that Laurendeau and Dunton would ask at the beginning of every public hearing: "Can English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians live together, and do they want to? Under what new conditions? And are they prepared to accept those conditions?" These profound and existential questions made it clear that the commissioners were defining the mandate in a way that went to the fundamental issue of whether the country would, or should, continue to exist – and in what form.

"It is impossible to understand Canadian language policy in ignorance of the past that created it, for it is a continuation of centuries of conflict, competition, and compromise between two of the great world languages and the powers that propagated them within the ever-changing contexts of their domains."[1]

On July 19, 1963, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was launched – with André Laurendeau and Davidson Dunton as co-chairs. The launch came eight months to the day after Donald Gordon, the President of Canadian National Railways, had been interrogated before a parliamentary committee on the absence of French Canadians from among the CNR's 17 vice-presidents, and seven months after Prime Minister Lester Pearson had called in the House of Commons for the creation of a Royal Commission.

They were an interesting pair: Laurendeau, the passionate, sensitive French-Canadian nationalist who had led the fight against conscription in 1942, who had fought Duplessis first as a member of the Bloc populaire canadien and then as the editorial page editor of *Le Devoir*; and Dunton, former general manager of the Wartime Information Board, former chair of the CBC and president of Carleton University. Both were urbane,

highly civilized men: Laurendeau deeply in touch with the traditions of French-Canadian nationalism, and Dunton well connected to the style and customs of the senior public service in Ottawa.

The members of the Commission were equally impressive: Frank Scott, Dean of Law at McGill University, Quebec labour leader and future federal cabinet minister Jean Marchand, New Brunswick priest and university administrator Clément Cormier, Ontario lawyer – and future High Commissioner and Senator – Royce Frith, Calgary French teacher Gertrude Laing, the University of Manitoba's Department of Slavic Studies head J. B. Rudnycky, and Paul Wyczynski, founder of the Centre de recherche en littérature canadienne-française at the University of Ottawa.

However, in my view, the key debate was between Laurendeau and Scott.

Laurendeau's view, eloquently expressed in the famous blue pages of the Commission's first report, was that Quebec needed to be predominantly French in order to have a critical mass for a successful, distinct French-speaking society in North America, and protections were needed for the minority French-speaking communities and for French-speaking federal public servants. He had also hoped that the Royal Commission would make recommendations for constitutional changes to give Quebec more powers.

Scott, on the other hand, believed that Quebec was legally and historically a bilingual society and that bilingualism should be extended to the rest of Canada. He feared that the Commission was leaning towards a unilingual Quebec and so refused to sign the report, which recommended that French be the language of work in Quebec.

Both men felt that they had lost the argument: Laurendeau because there were no recommendations for a special constitutional status for Quebec, and Scott because his vision of a bilingual Quebec as the basis for extending bilingualism across the country was not accepted. But in fact, both won: Laurendeau, in that Quebec has been clearly defined as a French-speaking society with certain protections for the English-speaking minority, and Scott because minority language protections have been defined as rights and enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.*

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The initial framing of the issue was not without its flaws. To begin with, the mandate called for the Royal Commission "to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contributions made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution." Even then, the use of the word "races," as opposed to "peoples," to describe English- and French-speaking Canadians raised eyebrows. And, as Eve Haque pointed out, "For the 'other ethnic groups,' the preliminary hearings were a contestation around the specific terms of reference, with particular concern about the positioning these terms seemed to imply."[2]

In her book, she quotes Mrs. Saul Hayes telling the commissioners that "the terms of reference have implications that give rise to the basic objection of dividing Canada into a primary group of First Citizens and a secondary group of citizens who *may* qualify as Canadians, under certain conditions."[3]

Haque describes the commissioners, as well as some of the witnesses, tying themselves into knots over "new Canadians." Some witnesses found that phrase offensive, arguing that, though it was originally used to describe those who came to Canada after 1947, when the *Citizenship Act* was passed, it had acquired a secondary meaning of those who had arrived in Canada after 1759, but were not of French or Anglo-Saxon origin.

Years later, Gérard Pelletier would write in his memoirs that he came to regret that the words "bilingualism and

biculturalism" had been used, since they created so much misunderstanding. He did not explain what he would have recommended instead – but I expect that if such a Royal Commission were established today, the chosen phrase would be "linguistic duality and cultural diversity."

For that phrase, I suggest, better expresses the contemporary reality. The two dominant language communities speak English and French, but within those communities many different cultures coexist.

Part of the misunderstanding that still exists about Canada's language policy revolves around the idea of official bilingualism, with many assuming that the goal of the policy is to achieve a state in Canada where everyone speaks both languages. In fact, the reverse is true. Official bilingualism is intended to ensure that the state can serve citizens in both languages so that every citizen is not obliged to be bilingual.

It took a while for the commissioners themselves to grasp this. One of the Commission's researchers, William Mackey – a distinguished scholar of language policy and founder of and now an emeritus professor at the International Center for Research on Bilingualism at Université Laval – laid out the principles of the bilingual state.

The first was that the survival of each linguistic group must be guaranteed. The second was that the state was founded not to promote bilingualism, but to protect the linguistic integrity of each group, meaning that the bilingual state must defend and even promote unilingualism for both. And the third principle was that the majority must not simply passively accept the minority, but must always help it to develop.

"In fact, there are fewer bilingual people in the bilingual countries than there are in the so-called unilingual countries," Mackey wrote. "For it is not always realized that bilingual countries were created not to promote bilingualism, but to guarantee the maintenance and use of two or more languages in the same nation."

At first, Scott was a bit taken aback.

"In regard to this idea of promoting unilingualism, I must confess that, perhaps lacking French logic, I could not see how a Commission appointed to promote bilingualism could end up favouring the promotion of unilingualism," he wrote in his journal. "Gradually it dawned on me, and I think on the others, that what Mackey meant was that unless there was a strong degree of unilingualism in the bilingual country for each language, one would eventually dominate and assimilate the other."[4]

The result – which Scott ultimately found unacceptable and dissented from – was a recommendation that the language of work in Quebec should be French.

On the basis of the recommendations that were accepted, the Royal Commission's goals were extremely realistic. English and French were recognized as official languages – not only in the *Official Languages Act*, but in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.* The position of Commissioner of Official Languages was created to investigate complaints and to report to Parliament on how federal institutions were respecting their language obligations. A multiculturalism policy was introduced.

Some of the Commission's recommendations were not enacted. The system of bilingual districts was not introduced – although later, for the purpose of language of work inside the federal public service, a similar system was adopted. Ottawa did not become a federal district, as the commissioners had recommended.

The discourse has changed. Rather than discussing bilingualism and biculturalism, Canadians are more likely to talk about linguistic duality and cultural diversity and how the two concepts complement each other and interact.

But the framework for discussing language rights, duality and diversity was established by the Commission. In the decades since, it became clear that it was possible for Canada to adopt policies that would welcome newcomers to both of Canada's language communities. French-speaking communities – the majority in Quebec and the minorities across the country – became increasingly culturally diverse and welcoming to immigrants.

The missing component in the framework, however, was Aboriginal issues. Those questions were largely dormant and absent from the public space in 1963; they emerged in response to the Trudeau government's proposal to abolish the *Indian Act*, which mobilized Aboriginal leadership in the 1970s and 1980s.

But it is difficult to imagine how the scope of the Royal Commission, already very broad, could have been expanded to address Aboriginal questions.

As it is, the debates over language policy, individual and collective rights, the future of minority communities, and the use of French as a language of work in the federal public service can be said to have laid the groundwork for the asymmetrical language policies that now exist in the federal government and Canada's provinces, the concept of language rights that have been enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the Supreme Court jurisprudence that has clarified and defined those rights.

That sense of compromise, that wrestling between individual rights and collective rights, can be seen in the work of Canadian philosophers Charles Taylor[5] and Will Kymlicka.[6] Both accept what Taylor calls "a politics of difference"[7] and Kymlicka calls "a post-ethnic conception of minority nationalism"[8]: a compromise between collective rights and individual rights that protects the idea of cultural survival.

That sense of compromise between individual and collective rights is now part of the Canadian political and judicial landscape. It is one of the important legacies of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism.

NOTES

1 William F. Mackey and Michael A. Morris, *Canadian Language Policies in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Michael A. Morris, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montréal and Kingston, 2010, p. 17.

2 Eve Haque, "Canadian Federal Policies on Bilingualism, Multiculturalism, and Immigrant Language Training: Comparisons and Interaction," in *Canadian Language Policies in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Michael A. Morris, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montréal and Kingston, 2010, p. 269.

3 Eve Haque, M*ulticulturalism Within a Bilingual Framework: Language, Race and Belonging in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2012, p. 59.

4 Mackey and Scott paraphrased and quoted in Graham Fraser, S*orry, I Don't Speak French: Confronting the Canadian Crisis That Won't Go Away*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 2006, pp. 65–66.

5 See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition': An Essay*, with commentary by Amy Gutmann (Editor), Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer and Susan Wolf, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1992.

6 See Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

7 Taylor, p. 61.

8 Kymlicka, p. 287.