INTRODUCTION

CANADA'S *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* AT 50: BILINGUALISM, PLURALISM, IDENTITIES

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It has been half a century since Canada first enacted the legislative keystone of our country's bilingualism, giving French and English official and equal status in the government and in all the services it controls, and creating the office of the Official Languages Commissioner to oversee its implementation. The *Official Languages Act* (OLA) sought to ensure that citizens could obtain, wherever population size warranted it, services of equal quality in the official language of their preference. The *Act* also aimed to improve the representativity of the Federal Civil Service to better reflect the composition of the country. Subsequent amendments to the *Act* articulated the Federal government's obligation to recognize and support the official language minorities, that is Quebec's English-speaking minority and of the French-speaking minorities in the rest of the country.

There is no doubt that the OLA has played a role in transforming our country. Five decades on, the linguistic duality of Canada has become part of our national identity, the majority of Canadians valuing bilingualism both in principle and practice, with support for it growing over time since its initial implementation. Indeed, the relationship between English and French speakers has become essential to understanding how the story of our country has evolved.

However, history has also revealed some important fault lines in our duality. Developing a workable model and finding an appropriate policy balance in a country as asymmetrical and complex as ours is no mean feat, particularly in the context of changes brought about by growing diversity. We are a vast country that stretches from sea to sea to sea, and the distribution of language speakers within our borders is uneven and subject to some interesting paradoxes. Quebec, the only unilingual

French-speaking province is home to the largest language minority, some of whose well-established institutions are a source of pride throughout the country. Our one officially bilingual province, New Brunswick, has witnessed the strongest and most vocal pushback against bilingual services related to cost, and the struggles faced by minority language groups in general have even become a focus of the most recent federal election campaign.

Apart from the bilingualism of institutions and government services, the bilingualism of the individuals who make up our country is equally complex. While the growing popularity of French immersion across the country has made it impossible for supply to keep up with demand, the motor for the growth of bilingualism in the country is to be found in the only province that champions its unilingualism as essential to its self-preservation.

The contributions in this edition of *Canadian Issues*, without claiming to be exhaustive in their consideration of all the issues, give us a taste of the multiplicity of perspectives and of the many possible ways of looking at the evolution, challenges and paths forward for an officially bilingual Canada.

The edition is divided into five sections. The first, entitled *Identity and Politics*, looks at the impact of bilingualism on our national identity. With a foreword by Language Commissioner, Raymond Théberge, outlining how the OLA has shaped us, Robert Talbot then draws on a very personal account of his own experience with French immersion to describe the transformative power of reaching across the language divide, ending with a plea to further Canadian duality with more awareness and opportunities for greater outreach and cross-community engagement. Jean-Philippe Warren, for his part, examines how being officially bilingual has changed the Canadian political landscape, it now being generally accepted that the Prime Minister of a bilingual country must show proficiency in both official languages.

The second section, *Minority Voices*, gives us a glimpse into the perspective of the minority language communities, the protection of whose rights constitutes an important dimension of the *Act*. While recognizing the positive impact for the Francophone and Acadian communities generated by the OLA, Jean Johnson, makes a strong case for giving the *Act* more muscle, so as to reinforce the status and legitimacy of French as having an important role in our country's future. The need for modernization is also raised by Diane Gérin-Lajoie in the context of the shift within Francophone minority communities towards greater ethnic and racial diversity, particularly among Franco-Ontarians.

Pointing to the size, diversity and contribution of the English-speaking minority in Quebec, Geoffrey Chambers underlines the vital role played by the OLA in protecting English-speaking rights against the upheavals created by provincial language legislation. He calls on the Anglophone community to view the OLA as a tool that needs to be updated, the better to preserve and improve the community's vitality. In the same vein, Richard Bourhis describes the OLA as a bulwark against deliberate efforts by provincial governments in Quebec to weaken Quebec's English educational system.

Section 3 considers the *State of Bilingualism* in Canada. Both Jean-Pierre Corbeil and Jack Jedwab report on the growing but still relatively low rates of

French-English bilingualism in the population as a whole and note that the largest number of bilingual Canadians are to be found in Quebec. Corbeil regrets that the English-speaking population outside Quebec has seen its level of knowledge of French stagnate and calls for measures and initiatives that could remedy this. Jack Jedwab's article anticipates future trends, calling on the need to keep pace with technological changes and to consider the way in which growing diversity will impact our two language communities.

In Section 4, two authors consider where things stand with regard to *Language Education*. Richard Slevinksy traces the history of language education from Confederation to the present, laying out the crucial role played by legislators, educational institutions and parents in preserving and advancing language learning in our country. While celebrating the great popularity of French immersion, Matthew Hayday deplores that structural challenges that have prevented us from reaching the stage where official languages programs are considered a core part of the education system, rather than a frill for a small minority of the population.

The final section, *A Bilingual Canada: Subject and Generator of Cutting-Edge Scientific Research*, gives us a sense of the way in which the unique nature of our country has generated valuable cutting-edge research that has enabled Canadian academics to challenge myths and contribute to views about language and bilingualism at home as well as on the international stage. Fred Genesee shows that the valuable work of Canadian researchers has led to a paradigm shift around the world in attitudes to bilingualism and multilingualism, viewing them as normal natural phenomena. In their extensive research on language borrowing worldwide, Shana Poplack, Nathalie Dion, Suzanne Robillard & Basile Roussel raise the spectre of linguistic insecurity and touch on the interface between science and politics, myths, fears and facts.

Milestones often provide an opportunity for reflection. After fifty years of bilingualism, the studies and appeals assembled in this edition give us the opportunity to look back on how things have developed, assess where we stand today, and project ourselves forward to imagine how best to address the key challenges emerging as our country moves into the third decade of the 21st century.