CAUGHT IN A TIME LOOP: FIFTY YEARS OF REPEATED CHALLENGES FOR OFFICIAL LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION

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As a historian of Canadian language policy, I might have expected that the year 2019 would offer the opportunity to reflect on the dramatic changes that have occurred in the education sector in the decades since the passage of the *Official Languages Act* in 1969. In some major ways, the changes have been profound and dramatic. Across Canada, French second language learning offerings expanded rapidly. French immersion became a wildly popular option for Anglophone parents who wanted their children to become fluently bilingual. A combination of federal funding programs and then the advent of *Charter* rights dramatically transformed access to minority official language education, particularly for francophone communities. In Quebec, bilingualism has grown significantly among both francophone and anglophone youth. Yet I am more struck by how much remains the same, and how the challenges and battles of past decades are constantly resurfacing and needing to be re-fought. Is Canada, as a society, actually learning from past experience with official languages in education?

The challenges of the 2020s should not be the same as those of the 1970s and 1980s. The fact that this is the case suggests that there are significant, ongoing, and structural problems with how Canada is facing the challenges of second official language learning and minority official language education. I focus here on the sectors I know best from my own research – federal-provincial arrangements around official languages education, and efforts to promote bilingualism – but it is evident that the general theme of "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" is prevalent throughout the sector.

In late-June 2019, the federal minister responsible for Official Languages, Mélanie Joly, announced an increase of $15M per year to support official language minority education. This sum, which was in

addition to funds already announced as part of the 2018 Action Plan for Official Languages, is to be subject to conditions requiring increased provincial transparency as to how these monies are used. The proposed conditions are a response to allegations that federal funding for official languages in education was being spent on programs other than what it is earmarked for.[1] For those familiar with the long history of these programs, the sense of déjà vu was overwhelming, but so too was the realization of how this dossier has failed to live up to the hopes of the 1970s.

Joly's announcement was the latest development in a saga that goes back to the signing of the first federal-provincial agreement on bilingualism in education in 1970. That agreement resulted from the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism's recommendation that the federal government help defray the additional costs of education for the official language minority communities. Subsequent negotiations expanded this to second language instruction, which would, among other things, help meet a federal goal of expanding Canada's bilingual workforce in the future. The agreement for federal support of provincial language education programs has been renewed and adapted many times over the past five decades.

It is striking that provincial accountability for the use of federal funds remains such a bugbear. 'Twas ever thus. In the 1970s, similar allegations swirled that federal funds were being used to pay for 'bilingual basketballs,' or that funds intended for francophone minorities were being diverted into FSL programming for anglophone children. Then, as now, the provinces fervently defended their constitutional jurisdiction over education, resisting the extension of federal oversight over how they spent these funds. The federal government continues to try to use its modest contribution of funds to encourage the provinces to create and expand programs in the official languages – which, to their credit, they have done to varying degrees – but with little say over the modalities of how this is done.

The bigger story here is the fact that this program still exists. It is dismaying that it is still necessary. When the first agreement was reached in 1970, federal officials thought that their support for second language instruction would be needed for about five years, and for about ten-to-fifteen years for minority first-language education, after which point the provinces would fully assume responsibility for these sectors.[2] Had these timelines held, the federal government's role would have ended in 1985! Clearly, the provincial governments continue to see official languages in education as an 'extra' that Ottawa should pay for. The vitality of these programs continues to hinge on the federal government's willingness to be generous with its funding – generosity that has gone through rounds of waxing and waning since the late-1970s – and with cutbacks made by governments both Liberal and Conservative.

The situation in second language instruction, particularly around French immersion, is even more

1 https://onfr.tfo.org/le-federal-promet-plus-dargent-pour-les-ecoles-francophones-minoritaires/

2 Matthew Hayday, *Bilingual Today, United Tomorrow: Official Languages in Education and Canadian Federalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 57.

caught in a time loop. One could easily create a series of Beaverton-style satirical fill-in-the-blank editorials and news articles to replace the annual round of standard pieces that run in major Canadian media outlets every year about the pedagogical merits of immersion. Debates that go back to the 1970s and 1980s – most of which have been long settled in the academic literature – are replayed annually in the public sphere.

French immersion has proven to be wildly popular since the first experimental programs in Ontario and Quebec in the 1960s. Hundreds of thousands of Canadian children are enrolled in programs across the country. And yet, French immersion continues to be unavailable in many jurisdictions. Where it is offered, it is frequently subject to program caps, and demand far exceeding capacity. Tales of registration line-ups and lotteries – which were common in newspapers across the country in the early 1980s – continue to appear today.[3] This lack of capacity in turn fuels the never-ending chorus of erroneous allegations that the program itself is elitist, because not all Canadian children can access these programs. But in truth it's a situation created by governments and school boards who refuse to fund these programs to meet parental demand.

Expectations for immersion are another long-running problem. Although it's been clear since the 1980s that the average French immersion student will graduate with French skills and fluency far above that of the regular French-as-a-second-language learner, they won't generally attain native-level proficiency. Advocates of the program have tried to dampen this expectation, pointing out that immersion will provide a solid basis for post-secondary education in French that can provide this final polishing. But the program continues to be subject to calls for its abolition on the basis that it has 'failed' to produce Pierre Trudeau-levels of fluency in all of its graduates and perfect grammar skills – language skills, which, it should be noted, are not being achieved in most of our students" *mother tongue* by the end of high school.

The elitism theme is picked up in a different vein due to an anecdotally widespread practice of children with learning difficulties being transferred out of French immersion and into the English stream. This occurs despite decades of research showing that for most learning challenges, children can do just as well in French immersion if they're provided with the same supports. The real problem is that many provinces don't provide these supports to immersion students. To be fair, the entire education system in most provinces is underfunded and under-resourced – a situation that is getting worse, not better, in many cases. This does, however, contribute to an approach to education cutbacks where French immersion – and language programs more broadly—appear to be the low-hanging fruit most ripe for being cut. While polling data suggests Canadians remain committed – in principle – to bilingualism, this support is precarious, and highly vulnerable when economic pressures emerge.

Canada is even experiencing a revival of anti-bilingualism activist groups. While not representing large elements of the population, these are succes-

3 On struggles around French immersion and FSL, see Matthew Hayday, *So They Want Us to Learn French: Promoting and Opposing Bilingualism in English-speaking Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).

sors to the Single Canada League, the Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada, or the Confederation of Regions Party. While usually being careful to claim that they have "nothing against" the French language or French speakers, per se, they are mobilizing the same anti-bilingualism arguments of a generation ago: that Canada can't "afford" the costs of bilingualism; that official bilingualism disadvantages those with English as their mother tongue; that English is the global language that everyone needs to learn; that French immersion is private school for a middle-class elite on the public dime. It all flies in the face of evidence that bi- and multilingualism are assets for global competitiveness that employers prize language skills among their workforce, and indeed that the number of Francophones in this country continues to grow and that most of them are not bilingual. Even though they represent a small fringe element, the anti-bilingualism groups attract a disproportionate share of media attention, and by extension, of the energies of those who are trying to defend the hard-won gains of the past half-century.

Can Canada break out of these patterns? Will Canadians reach 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? If not, the very real gains that have been achieved over the past fifty years may prove to be vulnerable indeed.