# SHOULD ENGLISH-SPEAKING QUEBECERS CARE ABOUT THE *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT*?

GEOFFREY CHAMBERS

Geoffrey Chambers is president of the Quebec Community Groups Network, which brings together English-language community organizations across Quebec.

The English and French languages have been at the core of the Canadian experience for centuries. But only with the adoption of the *Official Languages Act* in 1969 did Canada establish its first national level policy respecting and promoting two official languages. Parliament acted at the urging of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, after it concluded our nation was going through its "greatest crisis in history." The *Act* has since been strengthened to better protect and promote the two languages and create an obligation for the federal government to enhance the vitality of our English and French linguistic minority communities.

Whenever language legislation is discussed in Quebec, however, people immediately turn their thoughts to the province's *Charter of the French Language*, also known as Bill 101. The federal *Official Languages Act* easily escapes attention. With the Act having turned 50 this year, should English-speaking Quebecers care?

Most emphatically, yes. The *Act* sets out quasi-constitutional rights for English-speaking Quebecers. It confers our right to access federal services in English; ensures representation of English-speakers in the federal public service; and provides the right to work in English within the federal public service. It supports the development of English and French linguistic minority communities. It advances the equal status and use of English and French. At its core, it endorses the principle of equality for both official languages. To quote from the Royal Commission, this principle implies "respect for the idea of minority status, both in the country as a whole and in each of its regions."

It is often forgotten that our nation's largest linguistic minority lives in Quebec. More than 1.1 million English-speaking Quebecers make our homes in

communities across our province. From all types of backgrounds, we constitute a remarkable spectrum, a community of communities. Since the beginning, diversity has been one of our defining characteristics. The English language is the element that unifies our community and provides common ground for peoples of diverse religions and races. It has served as a unifier for our community including the many generations of immigrants who sought and achieved inclusion and were able to make Quebec their home. Our community's contribution has and continues to have positive impacts on every aspect of our society.

English-speaking Quebecers faced a major upheaval since the Quiet Revolution, most notably with the adoption of stricter and stricter provincial language laws. Many English-speakers chose to leave our province. Others chose to stay – because Quebec is very much our home. One result: our community has grown more bilingual and more appreciative of the French culture than most other Canadians. Nonetheless, a series of dramatic challenges over the past five decades has given rise to insecurity about our place in our home province as well as our future here. The *Charter of the French Language* dramatically narrowed access to English schools, forcing a steady and worrisome decline in enrollment, which led to a number of school closures and, more recently, provincial edicts transferred some of our schools to the French sector. Our language-based school boards are now threatened with elimination.

In the face of this turmoil, the federal support embodied by the *Official Languages Act* has proven decisive for the English-speaking community across Quebec. It bears repetition that one of the *Act*'s fundamental objectives is to promote English and French in Canadian society, by enhancing the development and vitality of English and French minority communities and by fostering the full recognition and use of both official languages. Federal institutions are duty-bound to take positive measures to implement these commitments. Despite Quebec legislation and policies that have impaired Quebec's English-speaking community, the federal legislative framework has provided an essential backstop and, indeed, a bulwark.

Quebec's English-speaking community has been able to survive – if not thrive – in the face of so many setbacks on the provincial level largely because of the specific policy requirement under the *Act* of "enhancing the vitality" of official language minority communities. This has been accomplished via successive federal strategies, Action Plans and Roadmaps. For example, the Official Languages Support Program through Canadian Heritage channels essential funding to linguistic minority communities to develop and build support networks, enabling the survival and development of vital community sector organizations all around Quebec.

Canada's linguistic minority communities benefit from such support in areas including health, education, access to justice and economic development. Without the *Act*, the underpinnings of federal support to our community would collapse. This all serves to underscore why the modernization and future of the *Act* is so important to our community's future – even though many appear underappreciative of the *Act*, seem detached from the federal language framework and show apparent indifference to its further development.

The role and importance of the *Act* is rarely understood or fully acknowledged. Let us celebrate that it has entrenched linguistic duality and bilingualism as identifiable Canadian values. This crucial lifeline has also assured English-speaking Quebecers of federal and community services in our language and ensures we can take pride in our first official language.

English-speaking Quebecers are in a unique situation: We are a linguistic minority – living within a linguistic minority that is also a majority. We viscerally understand the struggles that our francophone counterparts outside Quebec must endure daily to receive service in their first language. Similarly, we understand the strong desire of the francophone majority in Quebec to protect, preserve and promote their first language.

The challenges faced by our linguistic minority are no less significant. We face a perpetual struggle to maintain management and control of our institutions. Our overall socioeconomic standing is below that of francophones in Quebec, contrary to a deeply entrenched myth. Our access to both provincial and federal civil service jobs in Quebec remains dismally below our proportion of the population. Our ability to access justice in Quebec is hindered by a system of law simply incapable of fairly or fully operating in both languages. And we often find ourselves left out of the national conversation concerning official languages.

The goal of the *Official Languages Act* was, as former Commissioner of Official Languages Graham Fraser once aptly framed it, "to make the government capable of serving unilingual Canadians, not to transform Canadians into bilingual sophisticates." Put simply, bilingualism was adopted at the national level so ordinary citizens would feel comfortable when engaging with their federal government in the official language of their choosing. This has made Canada a much more bilingual country; more of our youth than ever are learning English or French as a second language.

While our minority community has clearly benefitted from generous treatment at least by the federal government, still more can and should be done. Many reports over the past decade have outlined the unique challenges we face – and also pinpointed additional resources needed to improve our community vitality. As a community, we also need to come together and recognize the contribution of this federal legislation toward our well-being. We also must acknowledge that past indifference toward the *Act* has hindered our involvement in the improvement of official languages policies and programs. While our community has been subjected to a bumpy ride over the years, we have and must continue to benefit from the federal legislation that specifically recognizes and promotes our existence.

Clearly, a better understanding of the *Official Languages Act* would help increase our community's capacity and motivation to more effectively advocate for our needs. It is time for our community to celebrate this federal policy to take a much more active interest in its modernization so that English-speaking Quebec can flourish in the future.