WHY LINGUISTIC DUALITY STILL MATTERS, 50 YEARS AFTER THE OLA: AN ANGLOPHONE MAJORITY PERSPECTIVE

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FOREWORD

Raymond Théberge, Official Languages Commissioner of Canada

Fifty years ago, we decided as a country to recognize the equal status of English and French in Canadian society by adopting the *Official Languages Act*. We decided that Francophones and Anglophones both had the right to access federal services of equal quality in the official language of their choice.

Significant challenges remain, but much progress has been made since the first *Act* came into effect. Canadians have far greater access to services in both languages, federal employees have greater opportunities to work in both languages, our public service is more representative of our English- and French-speaking communities, official language minority communities have greater recognition and support, important advances have been made on the legal and constitutional fronts, and our federation remains united, thanks in no small part to the *Act*. Perhaps the greatest lesson that the *Act* has taught us these last fifty years is that it is indeed possible, advantageous even, for different peoples to coexist within the same political community. That, in turn, has been Canada's lesson to the world. As Robert Talbot explains in the following pages, the *Act* has helped to make Canada greater than the sum of its parts.

The success of our linguistic regime depends on the work of dedicated federal employees who are committed to respecting language rights, and on citizens who are committed to the vitality of official language minority communities and the promotion of English and French in Canadian society. It also depends on political will, including of course, the political will of the majority. While we must always remember that

it is official language minority communities who are the most vulnerable, it remains critical, as Robert Talbot points out, that we continue to engage with the majority, so that they can see how the promotion and protection of minority language rights benefits us all.

As a bilingual Anglophone originally from the prairies, I consider myself lucky.

In 1983, the Regina public school board began offering French-as-a-second language (FSL) immersion education. My parents, having learned about this free opportunity for children to be educated in both of Canada's official languages, switched my oldest sister, then in Grade 1, from the English track to the new program. My other siblings and I would soon follow, all having the opportunity to complete the K-12 French immersion program in Saskatchewan and later in Manitoba. We were very much the exception, however. To this day, most Anglophone kids outside Quebec still do not have access to the opportunity to become bilingual via the public education system.[1]

Neither of my parents are exactly what you might consider bilingual. Dad can read most French, he can even speak it a little, and he enjoys watching the news in French to see how the "other half" is getting along. Mom can read a little French, too, and she served as a volunteer with the Regina chapter of Canadian Parents for French (CPF). When I asked her why she and my father put us in French immersion, my mother responded simply, "Well, why not?" To her, learning to read, write and speak in both languages (and for free!) and thus gaining access to the potential cultural and professional benefits that came with it only made sense. Besides, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* had just been adopted, affirming official language rights and the equal status of English and French in the constitution. Moreover, bilingualism was important for national unity and the future of the country. Although they could only speak one of the languages fluently, living in a country with two official languages was integral to my parents' identity as Canadians.

You don't have to be bilingual to support official languages, any more than you need be a doctor to support public medicine, a musician to appreciate music, or a high school chemistry whiz to value science. The available survey data bear this out. As of the 2016 census, just under 7% of the population of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where I grew up, was bilingual. And yet, a telephone survey conducted that same year showed that 83% of Saskatchewanians and Manitobans supported the aims of the *Official Languages Act*.[2]

1 Canadian Parents for French, *French as a second language enrollment statistics, 2012–2013 to 2016–2017* (https://cpf.ca/en/research-advocacy/research/enrolmenttrends).

2 Statistics Canada, *Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census*, November 2017 (www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Index-eng.cfm); Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (OCOL), *Official languages and bilingualism survey*, 2016 (www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/publications/other/2016/official-languages-and-bilingualism-survey-research).

Why this apparent high level of support? Public opinion is always subject to change, of course, and support for an ideal does not always translate into support for concrete measures. How then, to foster and strengthen this support among the Anglophone majority outside Quebec, whose language is not at risk,[3] but upon whom the political possibility of advancing our linguistic regime ultimately rests? How can we continue to make the promotion and protection of official languages relevant to them?

First, the Anglophone majority must constantly be reminded that our linguistic regime is necessary for the very existence of the political community in which we live. Without recognition of the two languages there wouldn't be a Canada as we know it. Paradoxically, making this point has been more straightforward in times of crisis – in the decade following the Conscription Crisis of 1917, in the 1960s and '70s with the rise of the Quebec sovereignty movement, and during the 1980 and 1995 referendums, for instance. But the point is as valid today as it was half a century ago; the *Official Languages Act* is a foundational piece of legislation that makes Canada politically possible.

Second, the Anglophone majority needs to see that it, too, can benefit from the advantages that come with the protection and promotion of the minority language. This is why it is absolutely critical that those who wish it for themselves or for their children have some level of access to the opportunity to become bilingual. As the Commissioner's recent study with CPF on FSL education explained, ensuring meaningful access to the opportunity to become bilingual "is key to the continuing success of the *Official Languages Act*, the advancement of the equality of status and use of English and French in Canadian society, and the fostering of a bilingual public service that can work, and serve Canadians, in both languages."[4]

Third, in order to more fully appreciate the importance of protecting and learning the minority language, then, the Anglophone majority needs to have a greater awareness of the vibrant and dynamic Francophone minority communities in its midst, and more opportunities to engage with those communities – in *both* languages. In as far as possible, they need to see (and hear) that French is part of the tangible, lived reality of Canadians both in and outside of Quebec.

When Anglophones think of French in Canada, they can have a tendency to think only of Quebec. This should come as no surprise; it is the country's only French-majority province, and seven out of eight Francophone Canadians live there. Conceptualizing of Canada's French fact in this way, however, can lead to a territorial delineation of linguistic duality along a "French Quebec/English Rest-of-Canada" axis. This is problematic for two reasons. First, it's inaccurate; one in eight francophones and one in four Canadians who can speak French live outside Quebec – that's nearly

3 Although the future of specifically *Canadian* variants of English and the culture associated with it may be less secure. See, for instance, John Allemang, "Who is speaking up for Canadian English?" *Globe and Mail*, 11 August 2014 (www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/whos-speaking-up-for-canadian-english/article19984471/).

4 OCOL, *Accessing Opportunity: A study on challenges in French-as-a-second-language education teacher supply and demand in Canada*, February 2019 (www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/publications/studies/2019/accessing-opportunity-fsl).

three million people![5] Second, it's not how the *Law* works: our federal linguistic regime, including the *Official Languages Act* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, recognizes and enshrines rights associated with both languages in all of Canada, and not just in any one province or territory.

I will never forget the first time that I visited the town of Hearst, in northern Ontario, some twenty years ago while en route to moving to Ottawa. We stopped in at the local Macdonald's for a quick bite, and to my pleasant surprise, everyone around me was speaking in French! Having grown up in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, provinces whose story is famously marked by the legacy of Louis Riel, and having a passing high school knowledge of Acadian history, I was certainly aware that there are Francophones outside Quebec, but I had no idea that Ontario was home to over half a million of them – the second-largest Francophone population in the country!

The experience was as enlightening as it was validating, for it presented me with what had been, until then, a rare opportunity to use my French-language skills in a "real life" context outside the classroom. It is hard to convey just how satisfying it can be, after years of learning French in school, to get to use it successfully! French-language skills retention is a major challenge for FSL graduates, due in no small part to the fact that, depending on where they live, they may not have many opportunities to use it after high school.[6] Even then, when they try to use it with a French native speaker, the latter might switch to English, well intentioned but unwittingly leaving their Anglophone acquaintance feeling crestfallen and discouraged. This is why, outside Quebec, it is so important to foster Francophone spaces where French is seen and heard by Anglophones and Francophones alike as the presumed language of interaction; in such spaces, Anglophones who are bilingual could be encouraged to use their French with Francophones and with each other, thus contributing to the vitality of Francophone spaces wherein the community can more fully live in its language.

Finally, and most importantly, the Anglophone majority needs to be encouraged to see official languages and linguistic duality as belonging to *all* of us. Even if most of us aren't bilingual, having two official languages and two pan-Canadian linguistic collectivities is a part of our history, our cultural distinctiveness, and our shared values of inclusiveness and diversity. In short, linguistic duality helps to make our country greater than the sum of its parts. It has, for example, driven Canada's development as an independent nation. Throughout our history, the advancement of our self-government, parliamentary democracy and federalism and of our place on the international stage has developed largely as a result of Francophone-Anglophone partnerships and of Francophone leaders and sympathetic Anglophones continuously pushing the agenda.[7]

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5 Statistics Canada, "Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census."

6 See Jean-Pierre Corbeil and René Houle, Statistics Canada, "Language Statistics for Canada, 2011 to 2036," *Ethnicity, Language and Immigration Series*, January 2017 (www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89-657-X2017001).

7 Robert J. Talbot, "Francophone-Anglophone Accommodation in Practice: Foreign Policy and National Unity between the Wars," in *Fighting With the Empire*, eds. Steve Marti and William John Pratt (UBC Press, 2019), pp.86-104.

I would even argue that linguistic duality has helped to make *English-speaking Canada* a more tolerant and open people. As 19th century British intellectual John Dalberg-Acton explained, "The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities."[8] It was through this lens that the *Vancouver Sun*, writing in 1969, viewed the adoption of the new *Official Languages Act*: "the legislation testifies to the innate decency and generosity of the country as a whole," it wrote. "French-speakers outside Quebec must have the same rights as English-speakers in Quebec."[9] Over the course of our history, learning (sometimes with great difficulty) to accommodate two languages instead of just one has helped Anglophone Canadians to see how diversity and difference are strengths, not weaknesses, and this in turn has fostered greater openness toward other cultures. Indeed, having two languages of integration instead of just one remains our best defence against the homogenizing policy of "melting pot" assimilationism that has prevailed elsewhere. It was not by accident that the 1969 *Official Languages Act* and the 1971 Multiculturalism Policy were designed to be mutually reinforcing. Nor was it a coincidence that they shared the same origins: the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-1969). "A country like Canada must admit diversity within unity, show itself hospitable, and refuse to tolerate any kind of discrimination," explained the commissioners. Every Canadian, they continued, should be encouraged to integrate into either or both of the official language communities without "the loss of… [their] original language and culture."[10]

Seeing Canada's broader diversity through the window of official languages has been part of my own lived experience. By learning French, I learned intrinsically that different cultures can have different ways of seeing the world and present different alternatives for approaching an issue or addressing a challenge. Learning French also gave me a sense of the breadth of diversity of the pan-Canadian and international Francophonies. My French immersion teachers and instructors included a variety of local Anglophones, Franco-Manitobans and Fransaskois, as well as an Acadian, an Anglo-Montrealer, a Romanian, a Vietnamese, a west African, western Europeans, and of course a number of francophone Quebecers.

The *Act* has never sought to oblige anyone to become bilingual, but for half a century now it has stood as an invitation for those who wish it for themselves or for their children. Having had access to the opportunity to become bilingual, I consider myself lucky. The *Act* has also stood as an invitation to embrace difference and all the richness that comes with it. For that, I think we can all consider ourselves to be lucky, too.

8 John Dalberg-Acton, "The History of Freedom in Antiquity," 26 February 1877 (Acton.org/research/history-freedom-antiquity).

9 In José Igartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada*, 1945-71 (UBC Press, 2006), p.220.

10 OCOL, "Canada's linguistic duality at the heart of inclusiveness and diversity," December 2017 (www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/newsletter/2017/canadas-linguistic-duality-heart-inclusiveness-diversity).