INTERVIEW WITH DR. DYANE ADAMS

Commissioner of Official Languages

1) Did you enjoy your experience as Commissioner of Official Languages?

Very much so. On assuming the position of Commissioner of Official Languages seven years ago, I wanted to have an impact, to get things moving.

For me, the Commissioner is an agent of change, who uses her powers to favor a more equal society. Someone with the vision and the means to steer the government toward positive actions regarding linguistic duality that deliver results for Canadians.

Seven years ago, my team and I had to start by putting official languages back on the government's priority list. Then we had to push for concrete and ongoing results for Canadians. The initial diagnostic was harsh, but it had to be given the situation. Our approach set events in motion because it generated a sense of urgency that triggers action, and action leads to change.

2) What do you feel are the principal things that you learned about the country during your mandate as Commissioner?

For one thing, that the linguistic dynamics that gave birth to this country are still at the core of what it means to be Canadian. The values of fairness and generosity that underlie Canadian linguistic duality paved the way for a greater acceptance of diversity. And those are the values Canada is known for throughout the world. After all, good governance is more than simply granting a formal linguistic status to all players. What builds a deep solidarity among the citizens of a country is, above all, the promotion of equality of opportunity while respecting identities.

This is why Canada included in its language legislation not just a commitment to promote its two official languages in Canadian society, but also that of fostering the growth and development of its Anglophone and Francophone minorities.

More specifically, one thing I learnt about the Federal government is that on an issue like official languages, it takes leadership from the highest level to get anything significant done. Looking back 35 years, as I did in my 2004-2005 Annual Report, shows us that great gains are made during times of strong, focused leadership. However, when political leaders and high-level public servants display little interest, we see periods of stagnation. Elected officials, as well as all decision-makers, must be aware that their action, or failure to act on this issue, has a far-reaching effect on Canadian society and on the linguistic communities that are a part of it.

3) Do you think that official language communities are faring well in Canada today? What are the strengths and weaknesses of language minorities in the country?

Compared to 1969 when the Act was adopted, official language communities are faring considerably better. We have witnessed a clear progression in nearly all aspects of life for these communities. To give a few examples: community-managed school boards have been established; the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* has enshrined the principle of the equality of English and French in Canada; a new interpretive framework has been developed for linguistic rights as the result of key judgements by the Supreme Court in the *Mahé* and *Beaulac* cases; more and more

DYANE ADAM was Commissioner of Official Languages from 1999 to 2006.

provinces have developed a linguistic structure; minority communities have become more aware of their rights and interests and have mobilized through a multitude of associations and networks; and governance models have been developed which allow the federal government and communities to work together, especially in the areas of immigration and health care.

But of course, there have been some disappointments. Even though the bottom line is positive, the history of linguistic duality in Canada is full of twists and turns, needless repetitions, epic struggles, missed opportunities, strokes of luck, spectacular breakthroughs and tiny steps forward.

Again, to take a few examples: the ability of the public service to serve Canadians in the language of the minority has been stagnating since the early 1990s. Initiatives to identify, recruit and maintain eligible right-holders in the schools of the official language communities need more support; and post-secondary education must be improved to provide access at all levels to second language learning and professional training. Research on official languages and the vitality of official languages communities should be a priority for the federal organizations that subsidize research for the creation of new knowledge.

Overall, considerable progress has been achieved, but there remains much to be done before official language communities achieve true equality.

4) What do you think are the principal challenges that face official language minorities in the years ahead?

Federal institutions must build closer relationships with official language minority communities and the communities must in turn participate in the development of tools needed to forge permanent partnerships with Federal institutions and the research community.

In November 2005, Parliament amended the Official Languages Act, making it mandatory for Federal institutions to take *positive measures* to enhance the vitality of official language communities and promote linguistic duality. That commitment already existed, in part VII of the Act, but only as a non-binding political statement. Now, Federal institutions definitely have the *obligation* to act.

The implications for official language communities are significant: they need to sit down with government departments and agencies and help determine the course of action that each of them can take to reach the two goals of this renewed Part VII. In order to do that, communities need a clear vision of how they want their development to proceed, of the indicators on which their success will be measured, etc. Partnerships will also need to be established with academic circles and research institutes. And in some cases, very little research has been done on official language communities.

Also, the fruitful integration of citizens from all over the world into official language communities is a great challenge, even more so than for Canadian society in general. This is an area that requires increased attention from the Federal government.

5) What do you feel is the main impact of Canada's changing demographics on official language communities in Canada, and what adjustments do you think are needed to adapt to the changing situation?

Communities are becoming more diverse. We need to better understand that diversity and linguistic duality are really two sides of the same coin, with the same underlying values. It's something that does not concern official language communities only, but Canadian society as a whole.

Immigration is of great importance to Canada's demographic future, and in particular to Canada's Francophones who are subject to the combined effect of a declining population and of assimilation.

The movement from rural areas to cities has impacted official language communities even more than the rest of Canadian society. In most provinces, the minority community – especially Francophones – formed strong concentrations in certain rural areas, but now those same communities are part of larger, diverse cities. That calls for completely different community development and service delivery models.

Let's take the franco-Albertan community as an example. For decades, Francophones resided in small towns and villages in northern Alberta, such as Rivière-la-Paix, Saint-Paul and Plamondon. Now more than half live in or around Calgary and Edmonton, where they represent only 2% of the population. How do you help bring the community together and create a "francophone space"? Like other minority communities elsewhere, franco-albertans took up this challenge by creating their own institutions where they can congregate, access services in their language and plan their community's future, places such as the Cité francophone in Edmonton.

The federal government needs to build on and reinforce this infrastructure. By opening a bilingual postal office at the Cité francophone, Canada Post acted strategically by offering service in French where it could reach its French-speaking customers. It also reinforces the Cité Francophone's role as a one-stop service centre for the community. That's precisely the kind of positive measures called for in the recent modifications to the Act.

6) What do you feel were the major accomplishments during your mandate as Commissioner of Official Languages?

As I said, I started by being very harsh with Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, because I felt that getting the government to take action was needed. They did. The Prime Minister created the position of Minister of Official Languages, whose first incumbent, Stéphane Dion, had the main challenge of crafting an Action Plan for Official Languages. The Plan, which was released in 2003, was an important step forward.

Strengthening the obligations of federal institutions toward community development and the promotion of Canadian linguistic duality is something I emphasized in my 2000-2001 Annual Report, and have been calling for ever since. After four successive bills by franco-Ontarian senator Jean-Robert Gauthier, Parliament finally agreed to adopt an enhanced Part VII in the fall of 2005.

I'm also proud of the work we did to improve the way we work at the Commissioner's Office, at all levels. An important aspect of our work is to convince – whether it be parliamentarians, civil servants, or the Canadian public – to act towards true equality between Francophones and Anglophones in Canada. And to be able to do that, we need to research a breadth of issues to support what we say. We have really enhanced our research capacity and have learned to communicate more effectively, something that requires the involvement of everyone in the organization.

7) What do you consider to be the priorities for the Office of the Commissioner in the coming years?

The new Commissioner will have to set his or her own priorities and establish his or her personal style, as I did when I arrived. That being said, Commissioners are like relay runners: Mr. Goldbloom handed me certain pressing issues seven years ago, I worked on them and others for seven years, and now I will pass them on to the next Commissioner.

Pushing all Federal institutions to implement the new legislative obligations contained in the Act has been the focus at the end of my mandate, and will undoubtedly continue to be a major issue for the Office of the Commissioner, the Federal government, community associations, as well as for the Official Language Committees in both the House of Commons and the Senate. Much more outreach and education remains to be done on this issue both within and outside government.

Fulfilling these new requirements includes bringing together governments (including provincial and territorial ones), communities and researchers to craft strategies aiming at enhancing the vitality of official language communities throughout the country.

Promotion of linguistic duality in Canadian society is also a key issue. A public opinion survey of Canadians' views on bilingualism recently commissioned by my Office shows that more than 7 out of 10 Canadians said they were "personally in favour of bilingualism for all of Canada." There is strong support for the opinion that being bilingual is a competitive advantage that enhances career prospects in Canada, but even more so in the world economy. The same study shows that Canadians are willing to make more resources available to guarantee the same quality of education for children of official language minority communities as for children of the respective majorities. These are important findings to build on in the future that reaffirm Canadians' commitment to linguistic duality.

These are some of the issues and research areas that I will pass along to the next Commissioner. These, together with other issues, will guide the work of the next Commissioner of Official Languages as he or she continues to protect language rights and to promote bilingualism and further the acceptation of linguistic duality in Canadian society.

But the bottom line is, the new Commissioner will come up with his or her own diagnostic, and advance the equality of French and English in Canadian society in his or her own way.