LET'S BE HONEST ABOUT MULTICULTURALISM AND OFFICIAL BILINGUALISM: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

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As the Agent of Parliament responsible for promoting and protecting the official language rights of all Canadians, including Canadians of diverse backgrounds, the Commissioner of Official Languages has long sought to understand and to better explain the relationship between multiculturalism and official bilingualism. It hasn't always been easy. Commissioner Max Yalden, writing in his 1979 annual report, called it "one of the Office's most thankless tasks… all too often we find ourselves having to walk a tightrope." At the end of his own tenure, in 2016, Commissioner Graham Fraser remarked that the question he received most often was: "How does Canada's language policy mesh with multiculturalism?"

In a nutshell, Commissioners past (and present!) have shared the view that the two policies are not only complementary, but also mutually reinforcing. "The principles of equality and justice which are the essential underpinnings of the *Official Languages Act* are in no way incompatible with encouraging respect for other languages," explained Commissioner Yalden in his 1980 report. "On the contrary, in our view, their preservation can only enrich the soil of linguistic tolerance and help to alleviate traditionally strained relations between English and French."

Let's be honest – not everybody sees it that way. Indeed, the two policies are frequently misunder-

1 I would like to acknowledge the Research Team of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for its contributions to this article.

stood, and, sometimes, deliberately misconstrued. Official bilingualism, or so it is *sometimes* said in English-speaking Canada, detracts from multiculturalism because it unfairly prioritizes French over other minority languages. Multiculturalism, or so it is sometimes said in French-speaking Canada, reduces French to a minority language among others, stripping away its equality of status alongside English.

But is that really what official bilingualism and multiculturalism set out to achieve? To act at cross-purposes?

WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT, ANYWAYS?

So, what is "multiculturalism"?

In a word it is, as outlined in the constitution, a commitment for "the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians." More specifically, the *Multiculturalism Act* "recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society," and commits to "a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada." Notably, it calls on government to help "preserve and enhance the use of languages other than English and French, while strengthening the status and use of the official languages of Canada." In short, when it comes to supporting official languages and other languages, the policy maintains that we can walk and chew gum at the same time.

Multiculturalism helps Canadians from diverse backgrounds to feel seen – to feel appreciated and truly at home in Canada. This, in turn, encourages them to identify with the shared values that define us, including the shared value of official bilingualism. Indeed, from the outset, it was called "multiculturalism in a bilingual framework," because the policy encourages Canadians from diverse backgrounds to engage in the broader society in one or both official languages. Canadian diversity includes, of course, First Nations, Inuit and Métis, as well as the descendants of historical immigration from France and the British Isles, but multiculturalism is not aimed at them, per se. Rather, it is aimed at other Ethno-Cultural communities including new Canadians and the descendants of previous generations of immigrants from around the world.

So, what about "official bilingualism"?

The constitution and the *Official Languages Act* recognize English and French as the official languages of Canada, with "equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and government of Canada."

> **"Official bilingualism recognizes that both official languages belong to all Canadians, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or linguistic background. English and French are the languages of our national conversation."**

But it's more than that. Official bilingualism recognizes that both official languages belong to *all* Canadians, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or linguistic background. English and French are the languages of our national conversation – the languages of our parliamentary democracy and of the Canadian government, of our educational institutions, justice system, and cultural spaces, the languages of the country's commerce and international relations, the ancestral languages of millions of Canadians and, for hundreds of thousands of newcomers and their children, the languages of integration. Along with Indigenous languages, they are the foundational languages of our history.

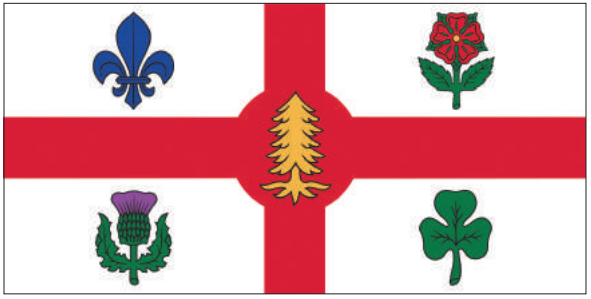
Official bilingualism also recognizes the existence of two pan-Canadian official language groups. There are two official language majorities, Francophone in Quebec, and Anglophone elsewhere in Canada. Alongside these live the official language minority communities (Anglophone in Quebec, Francophone elsewhere in Canada). Both of the two pan-Canadian groups are diverse and include hundreds of thousands of people who have neither English nor French as their mother tongue.

FRENCH-SPEAKING CANADA – MORE DIVERSE THAN YOU THINK

And there's the rub. What's often forgotten in the English-language discourse is that there is an immense diversity in French-speaking Canada, both in *and outside of* Quebec. Yes, English-speaking Canada is multicultural. But French-speaking Canada, too, is multicultural. Hence, Canada is multicultural in a bilingual framework.

For its part, French-speaking Canada has a long history of diversity that is often overlooked. Many Francophones have Indigenous, Irish Catholic, Scottish or even English roots (all of which are prominently displayed in Montreal's official flag, see Figure 1). Today, some 200,000 Indigenous Canadians have French as their first official language spoken.[2]

FIGURE 1.



Montreal's updated flag from 2017 depicts some early examples of Canadian diversity, including Indigenous, French, English, Scottish and Irish symbols. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In the last half-century, French-speaking Canada has become even more diverse, with immigration from across the international Francophonie; from Africa, Haiti, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Europe. Children of immigrants from around the world attend French-language schools, both in and outside of Quebec. Today, in Quebec, one

2 Referring to those with Indigenous identity. Nearly 400,000 Francophones have Indigenous ancestry. Statistics obtained from the Research Team of the Official Languages Branch, Canadian Heritage, based on data from the 2016 Census of Canada, Statistics Canada.

in ten Francophones is an immigrant. In the rest of Canada, it's even higher, where one in eight Francophones is an immigrant (in Ontario, it's nearly one in six, and in BC, one in four). Taken together, Canada is home to over 800,000 immigrants and roughly 800,000 visible minorities who have French as their first official language spoken.[3]

Surely, Canadian multiculturalism must include them, too, if it is to be a policy worthy the name.

PARAGONS OF DIVERSITY – OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITY COMMUNITIES

Official language minority communities are particularly important for Canadian diversity. First, because their very existence breaks the mould of linguistic homogeneity in the regions where they live, thus sending the signal to other language groups that linguistic difference is a societal value. And second, because these communities are themselves exceptionally diverse, even more so than their respective majorities of the same language when it comes to immigration.[4] The communities are well aware of this diversity. Quebec's Anglophone community has long identified with it. So, too, have the Francophone minorities since the late 1980s; immigration is a major priority for them today.

The point is – OK, my "hunch" is – that the countervailing forces of English and French can allow a space within which other languages can exist and sometimes even flourish, more so than they would in a hypothetical Canada with only one official language, and nowhere, perhaps, is this better exemplified than among the diverse official language minority communities themselves. Outside Quebec, for example, where English predominates, the children of mixed "French/non-official language" couples are twice as likely as children of mixed "English/non-official language" couples to retain the non-official language as their mother tongue (10% vs. 5%).[5] In Montreal, where French predominates but English has an important influence, Canada has its most multilingual city, with 21% of the population speaking three or more languages.[6] Meanwhile, across Canada, French immersion is popular with immigrant parents, and the statistics show that their children born in Canada and that children with a non-official mother tongue are just as likely to be English-French bilingual as non-immigrant youth from the majority communities, if not more so.[7]

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3 *Ibid*. See also Brigitte Chavez, "Immigration and language in Canada, 2011 and 2016," Statistics Canada, 2019

4 See Chavez, 2019.

5 In Quebec it's the other way around (7% of children from "French/non-official language" couples vs. 11% from "English/non-official language" couples). Referring to single mother tongue responses. Statistics obtained from the "Portrait of demolinguistic and socio-economic data," internal report prepared by Statistics Canada for the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2019.

6 Giuseppe Valiante, Montreal is Canada's most trilingual city, StatsCan data shows, Canadian Press, 29 December 2017.

7 Camille Bains, Immigration fuelling French-immersion demand as provinces vie for teachers, Canadian Press, 11 September 2018; Martin Turcotte, Results from the 2016 Census: English–French bilingualism among Canadian children and youth, Statistics Canada, 2019.

ENGLISH-SPEAKING CANADA – UNDERSTANDABLY CONFUSED ABOUT FRANCOPHONE DIVERSITY

Anglo-Canadians can perhaps be forgiven for forgetting that French Canada, too, is diverse. Multiculturalism has been important to Anglo-Canadian identity for a long time, and English-speaking Canada has always been heterogeneous. There were, of course, English, Scottish and Irish, Catholics and Protestants, to be sure, but also, even at the time of Confederation, notable Indigenous, German, Black, Jewish and Asian populations as well. Add to this the waves of Scandinavian, Slavic, Italian and other European immigration before and after the world wars, along with more recent south and east Asian, Caribbean, and African immigration.

This was why many Anglophones, while supportive of the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission's call for "two official languages" in the 1960s, found it difficult to identify with the Commission's notion of "two official cultures." They were perhaps 'OK' with French Canada defining itself as one of two culturally contiguous blocks at the time, but less so for themselves. "Multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" was far more relatable for English-speaking Canada, as it is today in any event for an increasingly diverse French-speaking Canada.

What really hasn't helped Anglophones to understand Francophones' diversity, however, has been some of the louder contributions to the French-language discourse that have mischaracterized multiculturalism as a policy that deliberately discourages integration. At times there appears to be an attempt to discredit the very term and to replace it with something else, because, well, if English-speaking Canada likes it, then it must be bad! This can leave some Anglophones with the erroneous impression that Francophones do not value diversity.

CAN WE PLEASE DROP THE DISINGENUOUS, ZERO-SUM "WHATABOUTISMS" ALREADY?

But if the word "multiculturalism" is sometimes suspect among some Francophones, it is perhaps understandable given that some of the louder contributions to the English-language discourse have mischaracterized Francophones as one ethnic minority among others. All too often, we hear the assertion that rolling back French-language rights will somehow bestow greater privileges upon other languages. As if anti-bilingualism advocates had any intention! (See Figure 2.) Indeed, targeting Canada's largest linguistic minority (by far the largest in Canada as a whole and in Canada outside Quebec, by the way) should come as little reassurance

FIGURE 2.

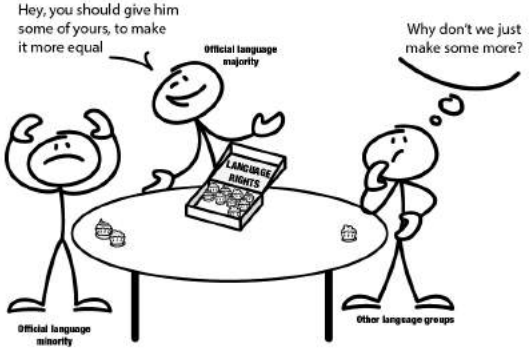


Illustration: "Language rights as a zero-sum game."
Source: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2021.

to other minorities aspiring to advance their rights. Something tells me that if we had only one official language, we wouldn't be hearing quite as much about the need to promote others.

Disingenuous 'whataboutisms' are nothing new when it comes to undermining minority language rights. "You see, we have a very cosmopolitan population in this province," wrote one observer protesting bilingualism, "who greatly outnumber either French or French-Canadian settlers and their descendants, people who contend with perfect justification … [that their] languages are just as much entitled to a place… as is French." Government communications, he continued, should nevertheless be "entirely in English, as it is obviously impossible to print every language spoken."[8] This statement was made nearly a century ago. But when it comes to 21st century social media, such comments are a dime a dozen.

THE LAST WORD

But that's just my take on it all.

Ultimately, it will be up to Canadians to determine how, or whether, official bilingualism and multiculturalism can work together. So, what do we think? In a 2016 public opinion survey, more than eight out of ten respondents agreed that "having two official languages has made Canada a more welcoming place for immigrants from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds."[9] Will such positive attitudes persist through 2021 and beyond? Much depends on our efforts to defend and to explain the two policies to Canadians.

"More than eight out of ten respondents agreed that 'having two official languages has made Canada a more welcoming place for immigrants from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds'."

Canada is not a zero-sum game. Our country can – indeed it *must* – find ways to ensure that all Canadians can feel seen, heard, respected and at home in our shared political community, whether they are Francophone or Anglophone, Indigenous or Ethno-Cultural, or somewhere in between. Official bilingualism and multiculturalism cannot provide all the answers, but, along with reconciliation, they are an integral part of what makes Canada possible.

8 Letter, A.M. Murray to Pierre Veniot, 8 March 1930, Veniot Fonds, Public Archives of New Brunswick.

9 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, What Canadians think about bilingualism and the Official Languages Act, 2016.