INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN DOBIE

Born and raised in Montreal, **Kevin Dobie** has been working with the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) since the autumn of 2007. He has worked with the provincial and federal governments on a variety of issues since 2003 and has had the opportunity to visit several English-speaking communities across Quebec.

WHEN IT COMES TO OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITIES, WHAT DO YOU THINK IS MEANT BY THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY VITALITY?

Community vitality is a complex notion that can be thought of as having two contributing factors. First, there are the tangible, quantifiable indicators, and second, the more qualitative factors, such as perception and a sense of community belonging and attachment. From a research perspective, community vitality is about a distinct linguistic group's ability to flourish within a multilingual environment. A group with high vitality will survive collectively whereas a group with low vitality could be expected to decline.

Most importantly for official language minority communities, community vitality is about our collective strength, and our ability to continue to become stronger as distinctive communities. From a quantifiable point of view this involves having strong institutional support such as schools, healthcare institutions, cultural centres, and strong representation before decision makers. More challenging to describe are a sense of attachment to one's community and a sense that the community is important to its individual members. Ultimately, individual members will also look for ways to improve their collective community vitality once the strengths and weaknesses are easily identified.

Obviously, the two factors are closely related and equally important to each other. Simply put, it is important to have the necessary institutional infrastructure, but even more important to have community members who feel an attachment to the institutions and a desire to improve them for themselves and future generations.

DO YOU THINK THAT THE YOUTH IN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITIES IS COMMITTED TO TRANSMITTING THEIR LANGUAGES AND CULTURE TO THE NEXT GENERATION?

The challenges for English-speakers in Quebec and French-speakers outside Quebec are perhaps slightly different for this issue. For Francophones outside of Quebec, the knowledge of the language is extremely important in their particular minority setting. The French language can serve as a real unifying device for the members of the communities both individually and collectively, and obviously, young people play a big role in transmitting the language and understanding its importance.

For the English-speakers of Quebec, the situation is similar, but not identical. Although we constitute a minority within a minority, we can be thought of as being surrounded by a sea of English culture, information and services. We are never quite as far from these in our first language as Francophone outside Quebec are.

This is not to say that language is not important for Quebec's English-speaking communities. As indicators such as the Survey on the Vitality of Official Language Minorities (SVOLM) show, the English language is important to us and is an important part of our identity. Also, it has been shown repeatedly that access to high quality government services in English, particularly in areas like healthcare and education, are very important to our community. However, the real challenge for us is to maintain and build a strong sense of community and community belonging, beyond simple proliferation of the language.

Historically, youth groups of Francophones outside Quebec have been very active and well structured. For the English-speakers of Quebec, the QCGN has recently put together a youth standing committee and is organizing some major projects around youth for the near future. The response and enthusiasm of English-speaking youth has been remarkable and has shown us that the future of our language, culture, and most importantly sense of community, is in very good hands.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS THE GREATEST ADVANTAGE OF HAVING A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF BOTH OF CANADA'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGES?

Practically speaking, there is the obvious advantage of bilingualism in the labour market. This is an asset across Canada and practically a necessity in Quebec for an English-speaker. Another practical factor is the ease of communication with Canadians across the country in their first

official language of choice. When travelling, doing business, or even just ordering a cup of coffee, the quiet respect shown by interacting with someone in their own language is highly underestimated.

Perhaps the greatest advantage however is the wealth of culture that becomes available to someone who understands both official languages. As an Anglophone in Quebec with a strong sense of attachment to my community, I absorb a fair amount of English-Montreal culture and pop-culture. As I started to become more interested in Francophone culture and pop-culture and made an effort to take more of it in, I was amazed at how rich it is. This would be incredibly difficult if I were not fluently bilingual. Based on recently released data from the Government of Quebec, I was part of a growing number of non-Francophones who were consuming more and more Francophone culture. This is a very simple, accessible way to gaining a better sense of understanding of each other. As Canadians, this kind of accessible cultural curiosity, interaction and support can potentially have a great impact on our perceptions and relations with official language minority communities across the country.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE PREVENTING CANADIANS FROM ACQUIRING A WORKING LANGUAGE OF BOTH OF CANADA'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGES?

The answer is at least two-fold. From a practical point of view, there is the question of quality language instruction and education in our school systems across Canada. From a less tangible, perception-based point of view is the question of there being real benefits to learning the other official language.

Language instruction and education is very uneven across the country. Based on the last census data for example, young Quebec Anglophones were more bilingual than ever. The link to education is an easy one to make. English schools in Quebec have been doing an excellent job at teaching our youth French at earlier phases in their education. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said in most other parts of the country, with rates of bilingualism stagnant at best, and in some cases actually declining, even among young people. To help improve this, it is essential that the educational institutions have the necessary human and financial resources in place. Also, it is essential that they are able to convey the message to students that learning the second official language will not only provide them with tangible benefits such as better job prospects but also open up opportunities for fascinating cultural exchanges.

I would like to see federal and provincial governments working together to stress the importance of learning both official languages. If the importance and benefits were presented more effectively, we would likely see Canadians more eager to learn. Linguistic duality should be presented as a beneficial Canadian value, worthy of important investments and study.