INTERVIEW WITH ENTREVUE AVEC GRAHAM FRASER

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IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ALL CANADIANS TO KNOW ENGLISH AND FRENCH? IS IT MORE IMPORTANT TO BE BILINGUAL IN SOME REGIONS OF CANADA THAN OTHERS?

This is one part of the policy that is misunderstood: the objective is not to make the entire population bilingual. And that has never been the case.

When it was introduced almost 40 years ago, the *Official Languages Act* was not intended to make all Canadians bilingual. However, in order for the country to function, some people have to master both English and French. This is particularly true in the federal public service so the Canadian population as a whole can receive adequate services.

There is no question that knowing both official languages is an asset when you work in Ottawa, the country's capital. But there are advantages to knowing English and French no matter where you live in the country because of the large number of official language minority communities, be they English-speaking communities in Quebec or French-speaking communities in the rest of the country. Being able to communicate with your fellow citizens and being able to participate in their culture is an enriching experience.

I often repeat that, to fully understand Canadian reality, it is essential to understand both of the language communities that make it up. This understanding is particularly important for people who aspire to a leadership position on the national level.

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

Essentially, to understand the country, you have to understand the languages of the two major linguistic communities. Our laws are not translated; they are written in both languages. We have two sets of judicial discourse, two political debates, two literatures and two languages of the cinema, television, journalism and music. To understand all these aspects of society, you have to first understand the linguistic universe from which they come from.

In this era of globalization, being able to speak a second language, no matter which one it is, comes with an important asset: versatility. This asset gives the person who possesses it the ability to communicate, travel and work everywhere in the world where the language is spoken.

Here in Canada, newcomers are more inclined to recognize our country's linguistic duality and the importance of participating in the national conversation, which primarily takes place in English and French. In Vancouver, for example, the offices of the Alliance française are located in the Chinese community's neighbourhood; its members take advantage of the organization's services to learn French. The community's members readily admit they knew, before immigrating to our country, that Canada has two official languages. They also encourage their children to learn these two languages so that the entire country belongs to them.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS THE MAIN OBSTACLE PREVENTING CANADIANS FROM ACQUIRING A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF BOTH OFFICIAL LANGUAGES?

In one word, isolation. Canadians do not know each other well enough and there are not enough exchanges between schools, universities and communities.

Since the beginning of my mandate, I have been emphasizing the importance of learning a second language, at all levels.

Currently, more than one million young people in Canada are taking French at school, including more than 300,000 who are in immersion and more than 1.5 million who are in core French. However, in New Brunswick, parents have to protest to ensure their children have access to quality programs teaching French as a second language. In British Columbia, obtaining a place in an immersion class is, sometimes literally, like winning the lottery.

These numbers do not lie: the next generation is much more open to learning a second language, in particular the country's other official language. Nevertheless, this renewed popularity for bilingualism also presents a challenge. Canada is not always able to meet the demand for qualified teachers of French as a second language.

What is more, I was disappointed to learn that it is common practice for students in immersion to leave the program to take "easier" courses and obtain better marks. They do so in an effort to raise their average and increase their chances of being accepted by the university of their choice.

In my opinion, it is the responsibility of the universities to recognize the achievements of young people who have placed a great deal of importance on their language skills. If institutions recognized their efforts, and not just their grades, these young people would be more likely to continue their second language studies up until university. Universities would thus be helping to better prepare their students for the job market because they would be making the learning of our two official languages a value.

With this in mind, my staff has undertaken a study on second language learning opportunities in Canadian universities to better understand the situation and determine how we can benefit from the progress that has been made and address any shortcomings.

WHAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE IN TERMS OF PROMOTING THE LEARNING OF BOTH OF CANADA'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGES?

The promotion of Canada's official languages remains a weakness within the government. Part VII of the *Official Languages Act* has two components. Pursuant to Part VII, the government must enhance the vitality of English and French linguistic minority communities and support and assist their development. In addition, it must foster the full recognition and use of English and French in Canadian society. Federal institutions have made progress on the first objective, but have a tendency to ignore the second.

Canadians must be invited to take full advantage of both their official languages. But this is only a minimum. Why stop there?

In Europe, many governments now recognize the importance of being able to function in more than one language, and Canada must follow their example if it wants to remain a world leader. In my latest annual report, I give the example of the United Kingdom, where the Nuffield Foundation noted the following in a study: "We are fortunate to speak a global language [English] but, in a smart and competitive world, exclusive reliance on English leaves the UK vulnerable and dependent on the linguistic competence and the goodwill of others."

In Canada, we are fortunate to have two official languages. In Europe, it is normal to know two, three or even four languages. So why is it so difficult for Canadians to learn two? And why are we so slow to capitalize on this advantage?

EST-IL IMPORTANT QUE TOUS LES CANADIENS ET TOUTES LES CANADIENNES CONNAISSENT L'ANGLAIS ET LE FRANÇAIS ? EST-CE PLUS IMPORTANT D'ÊTRE BILINGUE DANS CERTAINES RÉGIONS DU CANADA QUE D'AUTRES ?

Voilà un aspect de la politique qui est mal compris : celle-ci n'a pas pour objectif de rendre la totalité de la population bilingue. Cela n'a d'ailleurs jamais été le cas.

Lorsqu'elle a été introduite il y a près de 40 ans, la Loi sur les langues officielles n'avait pas pour objectif de faire en sorte que tous les Canadiens et Canadiennes deviennent bilingues. Toutefois, pour que la fédération puisse fonctionner, certaines personnes doivent maîtriser les deux langues nationales. Cela est particulièrement vrai dans la fonction publique fédérale afin que l'ensemble de la population canadienne soit bien servi.

Bien sûr, il est indéniable que connaître les deux langues officielles est un atout lorsqu'on travaille à Ottawa, capitale du pays. Cependant, il peut être très avantageux de comprendre le français et l'anglais peu importe où l'on habite au Canada, étant donné le nombre élevé, au pays, de communautés de langue officielle en situation minoritaire, qu'il s'agisse des communautés anglophones au Québec ou des communautés francophones dans le reste du pays. En effet, il est enrichissant de pouvoir communiquer avec ses concitoyens et d'être en mesure de participer à leur culture. Je le répète souvent : pour bien saisir la réalité canadienne, il est primordial de comprendre les deux communautés linguistiques qui la composent, en particulier pour les gens qui aspirent à une position de leadership à l'échelle nationale.

SELON VOUS, QUEL EST LE PLUS GRAND AVANTAGE D'AVOIR UNE CONNAISSANCE FONCTIONNELLE DES DEUX LANGUES OFFICIELLES DU CANADA ?

Essentiellement, pour comprendre le pays, il faut connaître la langue des deux grandes communautés linguistiques. Nos lois ne sont pas traduites, elles sont écrites dans les deux langues; nous avons deux discours juridiques, deux débats politiques, deux littératures, ainsi que deux langues pour le cinéma, la télévision, le journalisme et la chanson. Pour comprendre tous ces volets de la société, il faut d'abord comprendre l'univers linguistique dont ils sont issus.

En cette ère de la mondialisation, la connaissance d'une langue seconde, peu importe laquelle, s'accompagne