# TO 'BI' AND NOT TO 'BI':

## Canada's Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1960-1980

**ABSTRACT**

The Commission's greatest difficulties lay in the application of ideas such as "equal partnership" and "biculturalism". Evolving demographics and jurisdictional realities in Canada rendered the effort unworkable. Still, support for official languages and the multicultural policies that arose out of the Commission's deliberations is higher today than many critics care to acknowledge.

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### Assessing the Impact

In the early 1960's, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism reported that relations between English and French Canadians had deteriorated to a point where the two groups' very will to live together was in jeopardy. Four decades have now passed since Canadians were warned that while they might not be fully conscious of it, the nation was passing through perhaps its greatest crisis. In an effort to prevent this imminent disaster, the Royal Commission was mandated to inquire into and report on the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend measures whereby Canadian Confederation could be developed on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races. While in the process of attempting to forge such a deal between founders, the Royal Commission was also instructed to consider the contribution made by immigrant/ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada.

Some four decades later it is difficult to assess the impact of the Royal Commission. Clearly its principal impact was on the introduction of official bilingualism and federal multiculturalism policies. Although they are very popular amongst most Canadians some analysts contend that these policies were at the root of the problems that the federation encountered in the decades that followed. If one's criteria for measuring the success of the RCBB is the evolution of the constitutional debate than the subsequent rise of the sovereignty movement may lead some observers to infer that the Commission did not achieve its objectives. However in this regard it might have been too much to ask the Commission to quell the seemingly inevitable rise of the sovereignty option in Quebec. In effect, since Confederation the federal government had not achieved much success in addressing linguistic and cultural tensions on those occasions when it might have intervened. In this regard one thinks in particular of the historic challenges facing linguistic minorities in several provinces. Political and demographic realities had since Confederation contributed to the view that the overriding of provincial authority on such matters was more likely to put the federation at risk than the taking of action on behalf of language minorities.

Finally the Commission was faced with the daunting task of constructing an equal partnership between English and French that would presumably supersede the territorial-provincialism that increasingly defined the federation. During the 1960's a significant challenge for the RCBB was to determine the proper role for the federal government in matters of language and culture that were widely seen as within the purview of the provinces. With all this in mind perhaps the most significant question facing the RCBB was a constitutional/jurisdictional in nature something that was not effectively addressed until the Canadian/Quebec situation deteriorated markedly.

### Cultures Undefined

From its very outset the RCBB was confronted with defining a common language and discourse within which to situate the crisis that Canada was then facing as proclaimed by the Commission. Clearly the concepts used by the RBBB to describe the Canada's problems of identity and self-definition had a profound impact on the solutions that it ultimately offered.

Tout au long de l'enquête, une application peu commode des termes « culture », « ethnicité » et « race » semble tourmenter la Commission. La CRBB a rapidement laissé tomber le terme des « deux races fondatrices » et a commencé à utiliser subséquemment le terme des « deux peuples fondateurs ». Toutefois, la plus grande difficulté était l'application conceptuelle et politique des idées de biculturalisme et de partenariat égal entre deux groupes culturels. Qui plus est, les attentes de la CRBB à propos de l'introduction possible de tels modèles ont contribué au sentiment de rejet de la part des Canadiens francophones. Il était illusoire de penser qu'une telle entente bilatérale culturelle puisse faire son chemin dans une société traversant une profonde transformation démographique. La législation d'un partenariat entre deux « peuples » fondateurs dans une société libérale grandissante était impraticable, tel que l'a démontré les épisodes politiques et constitutionnels subséquents. Néanmoins, l'implication dans cette affaire était l'idée que les Canadiens français et les Canadiens anglais soient deux entités culturelles monolithiques reliées.

Il y avait une confusion compréhensible en ce qui a trait à la manière dont l'état serait prêt à appliquer le concept de biculturalisme. À partir des délibérations de la Commission, au-delà de l'acquisition des deux langues

(l'anglais et le français), la base pour cette notion n'a jamais semblé très claire. Tel que défini ambigument par la Commission, le terme biculturalisme réfère à la co-existence de deux groupes distincts qui ont plusieurs particularités communes. Pour en faire état, la CRBB déclarait que :

> Just as bilingualism should not lead to a blend of two languages so Canada's cultural duality cannot be taken to mean a mixture of the two cultures: each has its own existence... cultural is to the group what personality is to the individual: it is rare for a person to have two personalities or two styles of living at the same time.

In contrast to the definition put forth by the Commission, then Canada's Prime Minister, Lester B. Pearson, argued that biculturalism did not imply that the notion's social fabric would be characterized be the co-existence of two separate cultural societies. In his 1964 Throne-Speech, Pearson stated that "for one thing English and French cultures are not and cannot be separate and distinct from each other or other cultural strains in Canada". He added that "there was no pressure on one to absorb the other, but they should develop along with each other each I hope influencing the other".

Despite the apparent difference, the Commission and the Prime Minister were attempting to say the same thing. In essence they felt that it was possible to respect cultural difference while sharing common objectives. Canadians were being informed that there were English and French communities with clearly distinguishable traits beyond language. Yet the Commission noted that it was essential to reconcile the apparent differences of these two allegedly monolithic groups that had "much in common". Indeed, the Commission observed that while most French Canadians retained their mother tongue, they practiced on essentially Anglo-American lifestyle.

In an essay entitled "Bilingualism and the Myths of Culture", an eminent sociologist criticized the Commission for making absurd, often contradictory statements about culture, cultural identity and cultural equality. John Porter claimed that by defining Canadian character on the basis of a poorly conceived co-existence of two separate cultural entities, the Commission was unwittingly promoting social separatism and thereby, leaving unresolved serious questions about national identity. He concluded that the Commission would "bring us together through bilingualism, but keep us apart through culture".

### Quebec Affirmation

The Commission's substantive recommendations aimed at the promotion of bilingualism were often subsumed in the cultural discourse that was widely used during the early years of the inquiry. As previously noted the Commission's cultural discourse gave rise to confusion. The Commissioners felt that beyond linguistic remedies, a larger symbolic gesture was critical to stem growing nationalist feeling in Quebec. Such a step seemed vital at that time since leading Quebec intellectuals and politicians were talking about becoming "Maitres Chez Nous (Masters of Our Own House)" and talking "Equality or Independence".

The linguistic and cultural survival of francophones was at the very center of the Commission's mandate. But, while certain Canadians spoke vaguely of an "equal partnership", francophones in Quebec increasingly felt that their dilemma was best resolved within Quebec. As early as 1963, a then Liberal René Levesque articulated this view when he stated that:

> ... we must not mislead others into believing that biculturalism is a basic goal or value. It is infinitely more important to make Quebec progressive, free and strong, than devote the best of our energies to propagating the doubtful advantages of biculturalism. Moreover, if the French language is to be respected that will depend upon all vigour, on the economic and political importance of Quebec. This must become and must remain our first concern, by far out most decisive and constant preoccupation.

During the early 1960's, Quebec engaged in considerable expansion of the role of government. A Ministry of Education was established and the state became more active in the provincial economy. By the mid-1960's measures were being considered by the vastly expanded bureaucracy to support the French language.

### Canada: Bilingual and Multicultural

It was the link between language and culture that proved difficult to reconcile by the Commission and the task was left to federal policy-makers to address this very central element of the quandary that faced the country during that defining decade. In theory the policies eventually introduced by the federal government and Quebec authorities embraced different conceptions of the relationship between language and culture. For the federal government language served two distinct purposes. On the one hand, it was considered the vehicle for the expression and transmission of a culture. On the other, language had a neutral or utilitarian function permitting those of different cultural backgrounds to communicate with each other and thus conduct the everyday business of the day.

During the 1970's, the federal authorities focused more upon the utilitarian aspects of language in formulating its policy. In this way, it remained possible to sustain official bilingualism without establishing official cultures. As the idea of predominance by two founding peoples was deemed inadmissible, the Royal Commission's endorsement of official biculturalism was rejected so as not to create an obstacle to what was referred to as the cultural freedom of all Canadians. Several Canadians of ethnocultural backgrounds objected to the Commission's original pursuit of an "equal partnership between the two founding races/peoples" because they believed it would bestow a particular status upon charter groups that placed others at a disadvantage.

In 1971, the federal government opted for a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework. Prime Minister Pierre-Elliot Trudeau described this approach in the following way:

> ... such a policy should help break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. National unity, if it is to main anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity;

out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions. A vigorous policy of multiculturalism will help create this initial confidence.

En adoptant la formule de bilinguisme/multiculturalisme, les autorités fédérales maintenaient qu'au-delà de l'appui pour les langues officielles, il en revenait aux francophones de promouvoir leur culture à leur façon. Cependant, si la langue était effectivement l'aspect critique de leur culture, l'attention d'un fort appui linguistique était alors considérée suffisante. Pour plusieurs observateurs, la reconnaissance du biculturalisme était un geste symbolique d'une importance qui ne doit pas être sous-estimée. Cependant, le gouvernement fédéral croit qu'il y a eu un important geste symbolique pour la promotion des langues officielles. De là, les propositions originalement envisagées par la CRBB à ce propos ont été sévèrement délayées, sinon complètement éliminées par la politique du gouvernement fédéral.

Certains francophones ont considéré la décision fédérale de promouvoir le multiculturalisme comme un démenti du « fait français » au Canada. Une telle politique, on l'a contesté, placerait les Canadiens français sur le même pied d'égalité que les Canadiens provenant de divers milieux ethnoculturels et, conséquemment, il n'y aurait aucune réparation du dilemme culturel, cependant vaguement défini, qui confrontait les francophones. Ceci, en ce qui concerne le multiculturalisme, a été intensifié par la réalisation que les groupes ethnoculturels utiliseraient l'anglais comme langue principale ou secondaire, ce qui reléguerait le français a une position inférieure.

### Bicultural Backlash

During the seventies, the rejection of biculturalism returned to haunt the federal government. Protesting against the introduction of multiculturalism, advocates of biculturalism were more convinced than ever that only Quebec could provide substantive guarantees for the preservation of French Canadian culture. In the early years of the decade, Claude Ryan, then a prominent journalist, argued that if Canada had any future, it would have to be based on the equality of the "two founding peoples". This required that every Canadian obtain a working familiarity with the two official languages and become acquainted with the culture of the two "leading" communities. Ryan concluded that the effort to resolve the question of linguistic parity without redressing cultural inequities would be to "...say good-bye, once and for all, to the possibility of united country".

Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa expressed somewhat similar views in his reaction to the federal bilingual/multicultural initiative. He maintained that the policy of multiculturalism was highly unsuited to Quebec where the majority of the population was linguistically and culturally French, where a large minority was linguistically and culturally English, and where there were many minorities having other linguistic and cultural origins. The Premier claimed that the federal government's policy was founded on a questionable dissociation of culture from language.

Both Ryan and Bourassa concluded that the multicultural initiative contradicted the RCBB's initial objective of establishing equality between the two founding peoples and the eventual development of a bilingual and bicultural nation. With the federal government assuming responsibility for the promotion of all Canada's cultures – ironically an implicit recognition of the country's multiethnic character – Bourassa concluded (maintained) that:

> ... Quebec must take on within its territory the role of the prime defender or the French language and culture in North America and it proposes to do this with all the means at its disposal. This does not mean that there will be the slightest discrimination against other cultures.

While important Quebec spokesmen argued that multiculturalism posed a threat to the cultural survival of French Canadians, a number of Canadians of ethnocultural backgrounds believed that the policy lacked the necessary measures to secure their cultural survival and had more symbolic than actual impact. Ironically while some francophones were displeased with the absence of the symbolic dimensions of the federal policy those of various ethnocultural backgrounds were reduced to symbolic recognition.

### Le multiculturalisme : théorie ou réalité ?

En partageant avec les Canadiens français la notion que la culture et la langue sont indivisibles, certains porte-parole de groupes ethnoculturels proclamaient que le multiculturalisme n'était pas adéquat sans les garanties pour les langues non officielles. Il y a eu quelques réserves parmi les personnes plus âgés des groupes ethniques comme quoi que si les descendants ne parlaient pas la langue ethnique, la culture relative disparaîtrait. Un des membres de la CRBB est même allé jusqu'à proposer que là où les nombres sont garantis, le gouvernement fédéral devrait considérer l'établissement d'autres scénarios bilingues tels que l'anglais-ukrainien, l'anglais-polonais ou l'anglais-allemand.

Cependant, peu de Canadiens semblaient prêts à accepter l'idée d'un Canada officiellement multilingue, et la plupart reconnaissaient que pour maintenir l'harmonie, il était impératif de surmonter les scénarios linguistiques particuliers aux régions. Plus encore, il a été grandement compris qu'une langue commune – dans le cas du Canada, on parle de deux langues – était un préalable pour diriger efficacement les affaire publiques du pays, de manière à ce que l'on se retrouve dans une situation semblable à celle de « Babel ». Finalement, il n'était pas très évident que la majorité des personnes d'origines ethnoculturelles et/ou leurs descendants étaient en faveur d'une promotion si vaste de leur langue ethnique respective. Cela n'a servi à rien que, trois décennies plus tard, les démographies aient changé et que les langues tels que l'allemand, l'ukrainien et le polonais soient de loin moins parlées que le chinois et les langues sud asiatiques.

Although some ethnocultural leaders liked to describe the collective weight of their groups as constituting a third force in Canadian politics, this idea never translated into anything tangible or concrete. Ethnocultural groups never had a sufficiently common agenda to mobilize their collective numbers. As a leading ethnic advocate concurred, it was not sufficient that Canadians with ancestral origins were ethnics whether they recognized it or not. Being "analytically or scientifically ethnic" was not very useful where political

action was concerned. A decade after the adoption of the multicultural policy, Manoly Lupul observed that:

> It seems to me that what is needed on the part of academics who warmly embrace multiculturalism is less wishful thinking based on ethnicity as an analytical or scientific category and more attention to the real place or ethnicity in the daily lives of all Canadians. The inept implementation of multiculturalism at all political levels is no accident, and it is incumbent on scholars to explain the situation.

Still for some time following its adoption the multicultural policy was held up as a threat to the French fact in Canada and to the recognition of Quebec's unique character. The detractors of the policy however never feel the need to demonstrate either empirically or otherwise in what way the policy contributes to language losses amongst francophones or prevents Quebec's affirmation.

### Quebec Takes Matters Into Its Own Hands

The Bourassa Liberal administration did indeed pursue its own course in the area of language and culture. However it paid a political price for doing so. The introduction of Bill 22 declared that French was Quebec's official language while recognizing English as a minority language. The law also proposed measures in schools and the workplace to promote greater use of the French language. Still, the legislation failed to meet the expectations of francophones seeking stronger intervention in this regard. For their part, Quebec anglophones felt the law went too far and infringed upon their rights. The defeat of the provincial Liberals in 1976 brought to power the sovereignist Parti Québecois that in the following year introduced the Charter of the French Language or Bill 101 that did indeed propose stronger measures for the protection of the French language. One analyst has observed that the PQ's Charter of the French language was "more classically pluralistic" than the Liberals Bill 22 in that minority language recognition in the former law referred to "langue autre que francais", whereas in the predecessor law it referred to English.

Several aspects of Bill 101 rejected the utilitarian concept of language. The White Paper preceding the legislation insisted, "...the French in Quebec have never believed that their language could be dissociated from destiny of the entire nationality, of its economy and of its culture". It added that the French language couldn't be reduced to "...the right of each individual to express himself in that idiom when addressing governmental bodies, school administrators, his wife and children. Here, the French language coincides with a society through a historic heritage..."

Like the federal "bilingual-multicultural" framework, the PQ's "unilingual-pluralistic" design also included a utilitarian concept of language. Bill 101's chief architect, Camille Laurin, explained that:

> ... In order to live together in the same nation, the various ethnic groups which make it up must be able to speak and understand each other. Hence, a national language and common culture are useful, although they do not preclude the continued use of ethnic languages and maintaining of individual cultures.

Pushing the logic further, he stated that "if we believe each person's cultural contribution should be available to all, it would seem important that everyone be given the faculty to communicate with the national community". Hence the policy did partially retain the utilitarian idea wherein French would become the common language of all Quebecers. Initially, however, it was felt that this would result in cultural assimilation.

Whereas federal multicultural policy was believed to have put francophones on equal footing with Canada's ethnocultural groups, Quebec's approach initially appeared to treat Quebec's English community as a minority 'parmi les autres'.

However when it came to cultural identification this required supporting the ethnocultural expression of the older stock Jewish, Greek and Italian groups that had largely adopted the English language and thus shared it with those Quebecers of British origins. In the 1980's this involved the adoption of multiculturalist policies by the Quebec government that are similar to those introduced by the federal government but referred to as interculturalism. Marie McAndrew quite correctly referred to the Quebec approach as "de-facto multiculturalism".

### Conclusion

L'appui pour les langues officielles et les politiques multiculturelles qui ressort des délibérations de la Commission a survécu aux décennies suivantes et est plus populaire aujourd'hui que les détracteurs sont prêts à admettre. Les sondages de l'opinion publique confirment des niveaux significatifs d'appui pour le bilinguisme et le multiculturalisme à l'extérieur et à l'intérieur du Québec. Un sondage Environics effectué en mars 2003 révèle que trois Canadiens sur quatre (neufs Québécois sur dix) croient que cela a contribué positivement à l'identité canadienne. Dans le cas du multiculturalisme, huit Canadiens sur dix (trois Québécois sur quatre) croient que cela a contribué positivement à l'identité canadienne. Dans un sondage effectué en mars 2002, près de six Québécois sur dix étaient en désaccord avec le fait que le multiculturalisme constituait une menace pour l'avenir de la langue française. Cela signifie donc que les francophones croient que la langue française est en sécurité. Toutefois, près de la moitié exprime une réserve quant à son avenir, mais ils n'attribuent simplement pas la menace au multiculturalisme.

From the RCBB proposals through Meech and Charlottetown, the efforts at reconciliation through constitutional recognition of Quebec's unique character have been unsuccessful. Such approaches to our national identity crises are now widely viewed as missed opportunities by some observers and/or failed experiments by others. The view of Canada that corresponds best to the opinion of Quebecers is a multicultural country with two official languages (47%), with the multinational federation concept corresponding to 29% support and a country characterized by two founding peoples reflecting the views of 18% (Environics, October 2002). Public opinion notwithstanding, history has yet to render its final judgment on which approach to the country's identity conundrum will prove not only to be in the best interests of Quebecers and other Canadians, but also the most workable.