A TRIBUTE TO WALLACE LAMBERT

Dr. Victor C. Goldbloom was Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages from 1991 to 1999. A paediatrician by profession, he had been Quebec's first Minister of the Environment (1970-1976). He has devoted himself to bridging linguistic and religious divides at home and at the international level.

ABSTRACT

Canada, a two-language country since 1759, became formally and legally so in 1969 with the passage of the Official Languages Act. As a result, French immersion programs spread across the country, and the official language minority communities in each province and territory benefitted from increased resources. Wallace Lambert was a pioneer in the study of language acquisition, and Canada's achievements in linguistic duality owe a great deal to his research and his teaching.

I did not know Wallace Lambert personally, but he was a legendary figure for anyone interested in Canada's linguistic duality, and his work assumed special significance for me when I became Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada.

Ever since 1759, there have been tensions, and barriers of incomprehension and incommunicability, between English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians. Ever since 1867, there have been differences of interpretation as to the fundamental nature of the Confederation agreement: for English-speaking Canadians – four provinces, equal notwithstanding their differences in size and population, came together and were gradually joined by six others; for French-speaking Canadians – two peoples agreed to form a two-language, two-culture country.

In 1969, Pierre Elliott Trudeau – who paradoxically adhered to the first interpretation – consecrated our linguistic duality with the first Official Languages Act. It did not, contrary to widespread impression, make Canada a bilingual country. It obligated the federal government and related institutions to respond to Canadian citizens in the official language of their choice, providing two-language services in those census districts in which the minority was sufficiently numerous to make that a reasonable thing to do.

Keith Spicer was named the first Commissioner of Official Languages, filling the role with his characteristic verve. Max Yalden followed, bringing to it his vast experience of the federal apparatus. D'Iberville Fortier made a significant contribution to a major extension of the Act in 1988 which defined the federal government's responsibility for the vitality of official language minority communities. It fell to me, the fourth incumbent, through diplomacy and through the courts, to obtain the governance of their schools for the French-speaking minorities of the seven provinces which had not spontaneously granted it, and other resources such as community centres grafted onto schools so that adults and children could benefit from cultural and recreational programs. We not only saved Ottawa's Montfort Hospital from closure, we prevailed on the University of Ottawa to establish French-language programs to produce health care professionals for the French-speaking minority communities across Canada.

No sooner was the original Act adopted than it began to be contested all across the country. English-speaking Canadians had the impression that French-speaking employees were disproportionately occupying jobs and being promoted within the federal public service, and that enormous sums of money were being poured into a bottomless pit of "bilingualism". I devoted a great deal of effort to speaking in every corner of Canada, appearing on open-line and interview programs, and responding personally to every negative letter to the editor which appeared in my daily press clippings, to set the record straight: to show that French-speaking Canadians were slightly over-represented in lower-paying public service jobs and significantly under-represented at the management level; that jobs designated bilingual were in reasonable proportion and distribution to population; and that the annual cost of the program was a tiny fraction of one percent of the federal budget.

There were, fortunately, positive voices as well; and though most of them probably did not know it, they were disciples and inheritors of Wallace Lambert. Beginning in the 1970s, French immersion programs began to be offered in English-language schools all across the country. Enrolments grew slowly at first, then more rapidly in the 1980s, and by about 1990 they reached a level of 300,000. When I became Commissioner in 1991, I wondered if the enthusiasm might begin to wane and the numbers decrease. They did not.

A major reason was the existence of an organization called Canadian Parents for French. Many of those parents

did not and do not speak French fluently themselves, but they had and continue to have a vision of Canada which binds us together because we can speak to each other, understand each other and feel for each other. With the mistrust of the unknown person being dispelled, we can build Canada together.

The maintenance of French immersion enrolments at a little over 300,000 English-speaking children year after year has very particular significance. Each year a cohort of children graduates from these programs, and each year enrolments open at the foot of the ladder. It is inspiringly obvious that the parents of the graduating children are saying to the next generation, "This was a *good* experience for my child and I strongly recommend it for yours."

Here in Quebec, we went through a long period in which there was considerable resistance to French among English-speaking Quebecers. Language legislation was perceived as restrictive and discriminatory, and its implementation as dictatorial and petty. Those times have changed to a fair degree. English-speaking Quebecers, and not only the younger among us, are increasingly comfortable in French and comfortable in a French-speaking milieu. We have problems, and we feel under-represented and sometimes under-serviced, but our relations with our brothers and sisters of the majority are much more substantial and much happier than they used to be. We feel that this is a good place to live.

Wallace Lambert was a pioneer in the analysis of how the brain treats a second language. His seminal work is at the root of the French immersion program. From time to time it is challenged, often nastily, by people who have anti-French political objectives, but it has stood the test of time and been confirmed and enhanced. He deserves remembrance and honour.