

First of all, the federal government is responsible to not only respect the language rights in place in the legislation of Parliament and in the Constitution, but also to actively promote them.

Secondly, language policy plays a key role in maintaining the unity and national identity of Canada.

In order to place my subject in its proper context, I would like to briefly review a few points.

Canada's language problems are certainly not new. They began with European settlement in the New World and the joint occupancy of North America by the English and the French. At the time of New France, the fur trade had spread the French language throughout the continent. Conflicts were inevitable when the English merchants and traders arrived. This resulted in our first disputes over language, not to mention the political and military upheaval that occurred.

After the conquest, language continued to play an important part, both during the period when Canada was divided into two territories and after the Act of Union of 1840, which united the territories of Upper and Lower Canada. And, in a more current vein, the British North America Act, which established Canada as a federal entity and was our only constitution for the next 115 years, also contained measures relative to religion and education, factors that were closely tied in with language at the time, and to the use of French and English as legislative and judicial languages in the federal and Quebec institutions.

This all refers to the theoretical side of things. In actual fact, during the rest of the nineteenth century and even during the first part of the twentieth, Canada underwent a series of developments that had a profound influence on the lives of our official language minorities.

In Quebec, for example, most of the people were unilingual French, especially in the rural areas, while in the cities there emerged a class of bilingual francophones who conducted business, administration and politics with the unilingual English ruling class in the province or in Ottawa. Beyond Quebec, in New Brunswick, Ontario and the West, the francophone minorities were encountering increasingly serious opposition. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that things began to change. In Quebec, the French-speaking Canadians became increasingly conscious of their identity both individually and collectively and began to defend their language and culture against the predominantly anglophone-based – or, more precisely, American-based – economy and technology.

From 1960 onward, the Quiet Revolution in Quebec began to increase the awareness of anglophones also. In 1963, the federal government created the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Bilingualism and Biculturalism "to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution....".