

A Language Milestone

The 40th anniversary of the Official Languages Act—an important milestone in Canadian history—is being celebrated in 2009-2010. In the spirit of the occasion, we talked to Marc Lortie, Canada's ambassador in Paris.

OW: You have had a remarkable career with the department.

I arrived here in 1971 from Québec, having just graduated from the political science program at Laval University. Over the years, my professional experiences have been varied and stimulating, even to this day. I was not very comfortable in English when I began, and I worked almost exclusively in French for the first few years. I avoided situations where English was used.

OW: In 1971, what was the status of the use of both official languages?

Bilingualism was starting to become a reality, but let's just say it was rather complicated for a young francophone.

OW: What country could serve as an excellent model of bilingualism or even multilingualism?

Certainly not France, although more and more young Europeans, including the French, are learning foreign languages because of membership in the European Union. They need to speak several languages in order to communicate with each other. Here in France we see the young generation speaking English with much greater ease than was the case 20 years ago.

OW: What is the greatest advantage of knowing both official languages?

Being able to work in English and French is an incredible asset. It is an indispensable skill, enabling us to work in both English-speaking and French-speaking countries.

OW: Are you optimistic about Canada's language minorities?

Nearly 400,000 young anglophones are in French immersion, and I see young Quebecers quickly becoming bilingual. I am very optimistic about the future. However, progress remains slow. We must keep our shoulders to the wheel, as it were, to ensure that bilingualism does not take a step backward.

OW: What message should be conveyed to new recruits?

Apply yourself very early on in your career to becoming bilingual. If you have difficulties, don't hesitate to request an assignment in a French-speaking or English-speaking country, as the case may be. Bilingualism will be a valuable asset in your career.

OW: Many countries are taking steps to prepare young people for a global economy based on multilingualism. Is Canada ready?

Young people today have a better language base than we had, but, as a country, we need to invest more in language education. It is so personally enriching.

OW: How can the public service better reflect the added value of knowing both official languages?

The public service must be exemplary in terms of bilingualism—but the bar is set high. We cannot lose sight of the importance of bilingualism within our public service: it allows us to provide better services for our citizens, thus ensuring a better future for Canada.



Marc Lortie