



Statements and Speeches

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THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE IN CANADA

Address by Maxwell Yalden, Ambassador to Belgium, to members of the Amitiés belgo-canadiennes-luxembourgeoises, Brussels, December 4, 1984.

...Among the many common interests that link our countries, there is one on both sides of the Atlantic that can easily become a passion, since it brings to bear such an influence on our identities and on our destinies. It is with this in mind that I would like to talk to you about Canada's language experience and the way in which it has coloured our political and social institutions.

Before I came to Brussels, I was for seven years Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages. In this capacity I paid two official visits to Belgium and was able to gain insight into the language situation here. I am fully aware, therefore, of the differences in our situations and of the fact that problems of this type cannot be reduced to mathematical equations.

Perhaps, however, what we have in common is more important than the differences between us. I am thinking especially of the fact that whatever approach is taken toward bilingualism, we are dealing mainly with a very human problem that must be handled with tolerance and a willingness to co-operate; without these there is no possibility of success. This is the reason we are searching for equitable solutions that show flexibility and pragmatism. It is in this spirit that I would like to describe what has happened and what is happening in Canada.

Let me first emphasize the element of continuity, which in my mind is of the utmost importance. As you know, as a result of the general election of September 4 the Liberal Party lost to the Conservatives, who were given a huge majority in Parliament. Some Canadians felt that this should herald the abandonment of a policy that has often been associated with former Prime Minister Trudeau. But the new government, and especially the new Prime Minister, Mr. Brian Mulroney, have pledged as firmly as their most committed predecessors to maintain and even to strengthen this policy of providing service in their language to our official language minorities.

Thus in the November 5 Throne Speech – a general policy statement given at the opening of a new session of Parliament – the Governor General stated that national unity required co-operation between the two levels of government to support the official language minorities and to promote the multicultural nature of our country. The government, he went on to say, was committed to respecting the equality of the two official languages enshrined in the legislation. Since this was vital to our originality and our identity as a country, it must be enshrined in fact as well as law. The cabinet ministers, he said, recognized the need to see continuous progress and to exhibit the vigilance required in this crucial area of Canada's national life.

For the new Canadian government, this was a clear reaffirmation of two principles that have been the generating force behind Canada's language experience for the past 20 years.
