

Canada Weekly

REF

Volume 9, No. 7

February 18, 1981

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
AFFAIRES EXTERIEURES
OTTAWA
FEB 25 1981
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Ottawa, Canada

- History and status of Canada's two official languages, 1
- Special three-year industry and labour program, 3
- Parliamentarians for World Order seek consultative status at UN, 3
- Products to Mexico, 3
- De Havilland expands for DASH-8, 4
- Canadian companies push to export table wines, 4
- Rendez-vous Canada in Calgary, 5
- Cable TV licensing reviewed, 5
- Scientists make eye for Canadian-designed robot arm, 5
- Handbook provides food facts, 6
- Trilateral farming agreement signed, 6
- Computer speeds up transplants, 6
- Tips for Arctic travellers, 6
- Podborski leads downhill, 6
- News of the arts — film, 7
- Electricity production and consumption rise, 8
- News briefs, 8

History and status of Canada's two official languages

During Canada Days at Nancy in France held at the end of January, Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages Max Yalden gave a speech on the status of the official languages in Canada. After giving a brief history of the co-existence of the French and English languages in Canada, Mr. Yalden explained the policies followed by the federal and provincial governments.

Excerpts from his speech, which also addressed the question of entrenching language rights in a Canadian charter of rights and freedoms, follow:

...The first official measures concerning the use of the two languages in Canada were taken during the eighteenth century, not long after the ethnic and linguistic upheaval in Acadia. Thus, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 gave French official status in the newly conquered land; the provisions of the Constitutional Act of 1791 divided the Laurentian Territory into English-speaking Upper Canada and French-speaking Lower Canada; and from its inception, the Legislative Assembly elected by Lower Canada granted equal status to English and French.

With the Act of Union in 1840, the two territories were reunited into the province of Canada. The act stipulated that English would be the only language used in the Legislative Assembly but did not exclude the possibility of translating

documents for administrative purposes. From the beginning, the new legislature was forced to use French to such an extent that it requested London to re-establish the official language status of French and this was done in 1848.

...In 1867, the British North America Act created the Canadian federation. Certain provisions of the act related to denominational education — at that time language was closely related with religion — especially in Quebec, New Brunswick and Ontario, where the largest Francophone communities were located. The act also had provisions concerning the use of French and English as judicial and legislative languages in federal and Quebec institutions....

The last part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth witnessed the strengthening of a reaction against the recognition and maintenance of language rights for Francophone minorities. This opposition had been developing for several years in most provinces outside Quebec and even in the federal territories.

Favourable measures

The second half of the twentieth century, however, has seen the adoption of a series of formal and informal measures at various levels of government on behalf of these minorities, including certain practices and customs which favour them.

Thus, at the federal level, simultaneous translation became the norm in parliamentary debates; bilingual signs appeared for the first time in Ottawa and in regions with Francophone communities; postage stamps, bank notes and government publications became bilingual; and radio



Max Yalden

Sixty-two years ago this week...
Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the first French-Canadian to become Prime Minister of Canada (1896-1911), died.

Feb 18 / 81