



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.

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....".

The Commission confirmed that relations between French- and English-Canadians had reached a crisis level, and that the growing cultural segregation between the two language communities could no longer be tolerated.

On the basis of these assertions, the Commission recommended that the government adopt a large-scale program of intervention to strengthen and consolidate the bilingual character of the country as a whole. The federal government ratified most of the Commission's recommendations, and in 1969 Parliament adopted the Official Languages Act, section 2 of which reads as follows:

"The English and French languages are the official languages of Canada for all purposes of the Parliament and Government of Canada, and possess and enjoy equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all the institutions of the Parliament and Government of Canada."

It is important to note that this act rests far more on the principle of personality than on that of territoriality, a point I will return to later.

Among others, the act contains a series of related measures pertaining to the following:

- ways and means of promulgating official texts in the two languages;
- equal status for both versions of these texts;
- the public's right to be served in its own language;
- the obligation of federal departments and agencies to provide service in both languages;
- use of the two languages in a legal context;
- creation of the office of Commissioner of Official Languages, a sort of language ambassador who audits the government's adherence to the rights created by the act and generally serves as a spokesman on language questions.

On the recommendation of the Royal Commission, the government accepted two basic principles that were reaffirmed in the declaration it made a month ago: namely, the crucial importance of language rights for the country's unity and identity, and the important role conferred upon the federal government, even in an area such as education, which lies exclusively within provincial jurisdiction. For example, for the past 12 years the federal government has been supplying the provinces with funds to improve the quality and availability of instruction in the other official language.

The Official Languages Act is also based on the principle of "personality", by the fact that it guarantees to *all* Canadians the right to receive public service in either official language, as opposed to the principle of territoriality, which recognizes language rights by region of residence only. Herein lies one essential difference between Belgium and Canada.

Even in Canada though, individual rights and legal equality are secondary to certain criteria that fall within the concept of territoriality. One cannot expect to receive the same services in French in Vancouver that would be available in Ottawa, or the same service in English in Rimouski that one would receive in Montreal. In other words, the services provided by the federal government to Canadians in the language of their choice are limited by considerations of geography and demand.

These are the legislative and policy structures that sustain the Canadian effort to achieve language reform. I should add that the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms included in the Constitution of 1982 enshrines in the founding statute of Canada most of the provisions I have just described as being part of the Official Languages Act. As you know, the repatriation of the Constitution was a subject of much controversy in Canada, to say the least, especially in Quebec. But this is another subject altogether.

I have outlined the structures for you, but where do we stand in reality? What have we accomplished and what are the prospects for the future?

In order to answer these questions, we have to understand what is meant by the term "bilingualism". It is not a question of individual bilingualism, but one of official bilingualism. I do not expect all Canadians to be able to speak French and English equally well on the sidewalks of Edmonton or Montreal. Rather, it is a question of the government being able to provide its services in both languages.

What services are we talking about? Mainly, those at the federal level, within the institutions of the central government. This would include the legislature, the Parliament, the courts, the government departments and corporations, and the cultural institutions such as the state-run television and radio. Federal employees who speak the minority language should also be able to work in their language and to participate fully in the government which belongs to them as much as it does to the majority.

To this list I would add one significant provincial element, namely education. Without access to education in its own language, a minority language group has little chance of surviving.

Where do we now stand in regard to government services? What does the record of recent years indicate?

I feel that the record is relatively positive, and we are continuing to advance. Although there remains much to be done, 12 years after the adoption of the Official Languages Act, the federal administration is not the same institution it was before. More and more, Canadians are able to deal with the administration in their mother tongue. Participation by both language groups is more balanced. English and French are more respected than ever before in the Public Service. Provincially, although there are still some very serious shortcomings, it is a fact that access for the minority, especially the French-language minority, to education in its own language is substantially greater than it was 15 or 20 years ago.

All this, I should emphasize, does not mean that the battle has been won. Far from it. But I can say in all honesty that we are well on the way — and perhaps I am speaking here with the faith of a former Commissioner of Official Languages — and we have every likelihood of success.

As for the relationships between our different language groups and the likelihood of their expanding to all regions of the country, we do not yet know. I would not be honest if I told you that the census and other statistics gave cause for optimism. However, I must emphasize that there is among our minorities a vitality and a determination to preserve their rights and their language that I have seen myself and that transcends mere facts and figures.

In terms of national unity, It would be presumptuous on my part to claim that language reform has saved the Canadian federation. However, I think I know where Canada would be today if we had not decided to try to redress the serious imbalances between anglophones and francophones.

Of course, there is still tension between regions, and the language tensions have not disappeared. How could it be otherwise in a country like ours? Only time will tell whether we can create a new and healthier unity based on respect for our two national languages. For the time being, I can only state that these rights must be recognized across Canada if we are to survive as a nation. Canada's newly-elected government is fully aware of this, and to me this is an element of continuity which, as I said at the outset, is very reassuring and encouraging.