
Language and Politics in New Brunswick

by Emery M. Fanjoy

Sixty three percent of the population of New Brunswick is English-speaking, almost all of British descent and with a loyalist tradition. Thirty two percent is French-speaking, the greater portion of them being Acadians. About five percent have another mother tongue.

A peaceful social revolution has been under way in that province for about 25 years. It is transforming the province from one of political and economic dominance by the linguistic majority to one of more representative participation. New Brunswick language policy now reinforces the province's uniqueness. In all essential aspects of public administration, both languages are legally equal.

Operationally, the new relationship is not fully in place. Public services are not yet being delivered adequately in both languages in all regions. Francophones are under-represented in the senior ranks of the public service and in the capital. English is still the predominant working language in most central offices. Municipalities and public utilities have a mixed record of serving the public in the language of choice.

However, solid progress has been made in implementing the policies and the new vision behind them. The province has been transformed in both reality and attitudes from what it was only 20 years ago.

The mainline political parties have consistently supported the vision of New Brunswick as an officially bilingual province, with the party leaders being in the forefront. Conflicts or concerns on language policy have been worked out or suppressed within their caucuses. With perceived public acceptance of the changes, the subject has not been a major political issue except in the last few years.

Opposition to the vision was muted and generally felt to be socially unacceptable. The risk of being labelled "bigot" was real. There were no effective vehicles for opposing views to be expressed. That changed last year

with the formation of a new political party. The Confederation of Regions Party exists because of its opposition to official bilingualism. We will consider what led to its creation.

The English and French cultures are not easy to summarize. They have been on this continent for hundreds of years, in New Brunswick alone for 225 years, competing and cooperating in many ways and at many levels. They have a thousand years of interwoven history in Europe. In large part, Canada is defined by its French-English duality, with all the historical baggage this implies. Our history is one of peaceful evolution based on talking things out. You hear a lot of that on French-English relations these days. We are country-building and, in the case of New Brunswick, province-building.

New Brunswick has a population of 720,000, with a density nearly the same as Maine, about 25 persons per square mile. Several other characteristics of the province are similar to Maine: about a 50:50 urban/rural split of the population; a woods and water tradition for employment and recreation; three dominant cities, with the capital being the smallest of the three; and lastly, a remoteness from power in their respective nations for most of this century.

The province is approximately a square. If you draw a line from the northwest to the southeast, francophones are mostly above the line and anglophones below it. Generally, throughout history, anglo and franco New Brunswickers have not mingled much. Interaction has been mainly between the elite, employees in branches of large firms, travelling salesmen, some intermarriage plus people crossing the imaginary line for casual employment. English has been the dominant language of business, political and intellectual life. Economic power has been largely concentrated in anglophone institutions. The capital, Fredericton, has been a unilingual English city.

As an anglophone New Brunswicker, with at least eighteen loyalist names in my family history and all other ancestors having come directly from Ireland and Britain, my upbringing and education in the 1940's and 1950's

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were typical of that for an English-speaking New Brunswicker in the eight anglo counties. The upbringing was based on pride in loyalist roots and British traditions. The French were portrayed in an unflattering and detrimental light. The history and myths I was taught were no different than those taught to generations before me and for some time afterward. We were part of the majority — part of great English-speaking North America and part of Great Britain. We seldom visited the French part of New Brunswick and never saw anything that portrayed it in a positive light or in a way that would increase one's curiosity. If one left anglo New Brunswick for holidays, it was to New England or English Montreal.

I can only guess at what my francophone fellow citizens were taught in their youth in the 1940's and 1950's. To be sure, their formal education was hampered by less money for facilities and equipment. Their teachers had less education. Families had less income and therefore less opportunity to be exposed to outside influences. Their communities and institutions were visibly less wealthy. The church was an important player in education, as well as in cultural and language cohesion. With few exceptions, the people were Acadians, descendents of the original settlers of the maritime provinces in the early 1600's. They too had their myths. They were seared by the mass expulsion in the mid 1700's, so imaginatively portrayed by Longfellow in "Evangeline". They were on the edge of society politically, economically and socially. They were not Quebecers. France hardly knew they existed. They had learned to survive by a combination of determination, courage and compromise. If they left French New Brunswick for holidays, it was probably to Quebec.

Stability and change

The province has had a history of political stability. Those in authority have generally been respected and accepted in the British tradition. The book, *In Search of Political Stability: a Comparative Study of New Brunswick and Northern Ireland*, by Edmund Auger, documents it well. His study focused on the French-English cleavage in New Brunswick and the Protestant-Catholic cleavage in Northern Ireland as potential sources of instability. The negative headlines of the Northern Ireland story are well known. The positive story of New Brunswick is hardly known at all.

The tradition of stability in New Brunswick continued throughout the 1960's, the period of awakening of Quebecers, closely followed by the Acadians. One of the most important francophone institutions, the Université de Moncton, a unilingual French university, was created in 1964. The violence in Quebec during that decade and

the next was not replicated in New Brunswick. The stability continued when francophone New Brunswickers gained basic legal rights related to language in 1969. The Department of Education was divided into autonomous French and English components, each with a deputy minister, in 1974.

In the 1970's, Fredericton started to become the emotional capital for all New Brunswickers and a place where francophones could live happily and raise a family in their language and culture. This change was vital to make public service employment in Fredericton attractive to francophones. That task is far from complete but progress has been made. Moncton, a city of both cultures but economically a bastion of anglos, recently elected its first Acadian mayor and made other moves to become more hospitable to the francophones of the southeast region. Saint John, the largest city, with a deep and proud loyalist tradition, has also been gradually opening its mind on this issue.

In hindsight, the changes go back many years. The pace of change however has quickened dramatically in the last 20 years. The old vision and reality of New Brunswick is being replaced by the new vision. The old vision included English dominance in key affairs. It was reinforced by loyalist myths. The new vision includes fundamental equality of the two language groups in all affairs and all parts of the province. It is built on a blending of the loyalist and Acadian myths into something that describes the combined history of the people.

There are many milestones in the evolution of the language vision of New Brunswick but these stand out:

- 1960 election of the first Premier of Acadian descent;
- 1969 passage of the *Official Languages Act*;
- 1974 administrative changes in department of education;
- 1981 passage of the *Act to Recognize the Equality of the Two Official Linguistic Communities*;
- 1982 entrenchment of official languages provisions in the *Constitution Act, 1982*;
- 1988 official languages policy for the civil service;
- 1990 request to entrench the equality provisions of 1981 in the *Constitution Act, 1987*.

Political life

One aspect of the voting profile is important. Because of the concentration of francophones in certain regions, they dominate voting in 19 of the 58 constituencies in the province. Further, they are a significant minority or small majority in another eight constituencies. This political leverage combined with other factors has been used effectively to maintain, create and expand their

institutions and symbols and to secure favourable laws and public policies.

New Brunswick like the other maritime provinces but unlike most of the remaining provinces, has been dominated by the two major national political parties throughout this century, the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives. Flurries of interest in a third party, once in the 1920's and again after World War II, were shortlived.

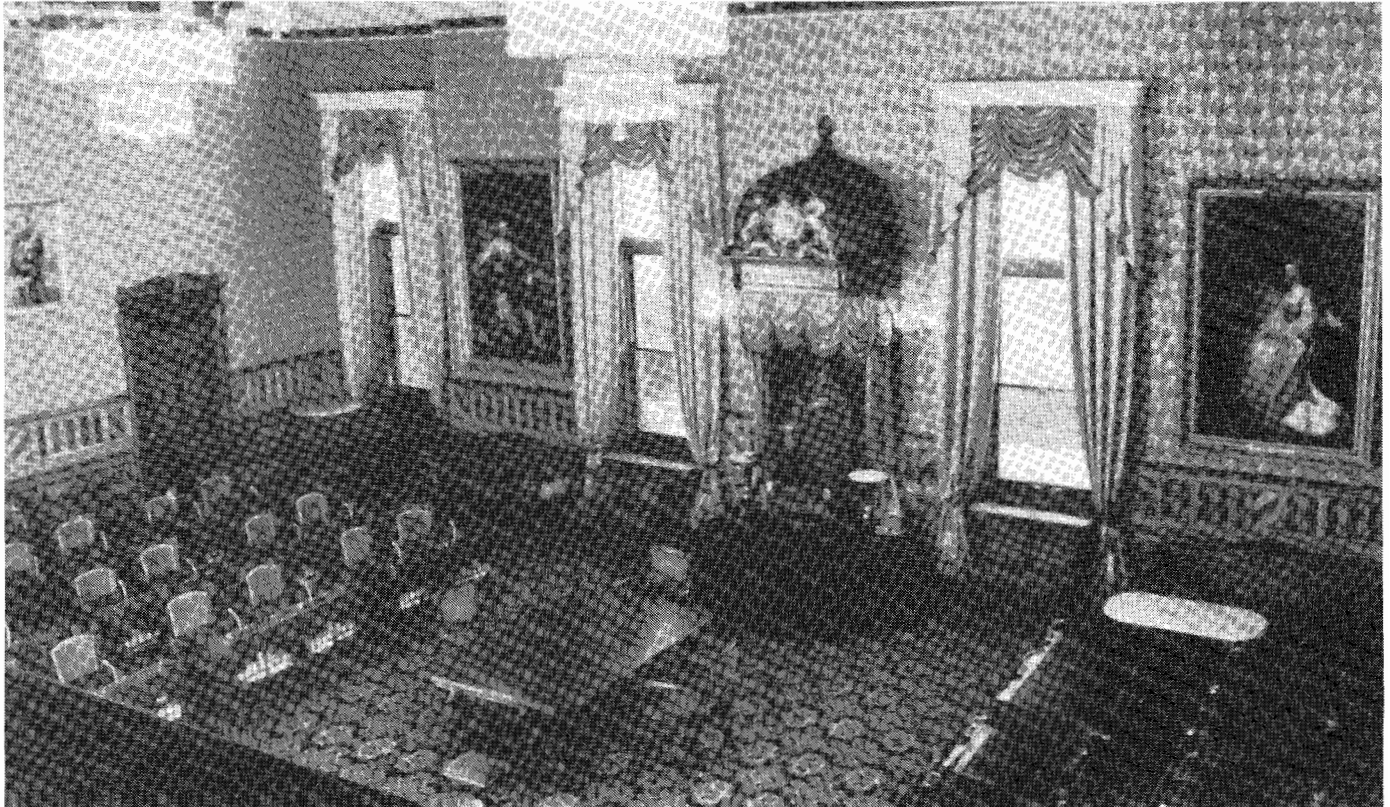
The Liberal party now forms the government, having won every seat in the legislature in 1987. The Progressive Conservatives, in office for 17 years (the longest period for one party in the province's history) are recovering from their defeat. The Tories had traditionally been the party of the English. That long-standing pattern was broken during the 1970's and both parties now have a good base throughout the province. The Tories are going through a difficult rebuilding, no one knows how ready they will be for the election expected next year.

The New Democratic Party has never been a serious factor in the province but its members have been trying for about 15 years to make a breakthrough. Their current leader is dynamic and respected. The next election will be an important test of whether the NDP has become a significant force in the province.

Interestingly, the leaders of both the Progressive Conservative Party and the New Democratic Party are women. That reflects well on the province's capacity for change.

Last year the Confederation of Regions Party came into being. Its origins are on the prairies, where it is still active and in English New Brunswick it has taken root, attracting large numbers of people. Its *raison d'être* is to oppose official bilingualism.

The current tension over language is not the only major change New Brunswick society has recently absorbed. In 1967, the Robichaud Liberal government enacted a series of legislative changes known as "the program for equal opportunity". The previous system of public services was heavily based on local ability to pay. Since services such as health, education and welfare were local responsibilities, the quality of those services depended on the wealth of the community. People in poorer regions had less opportunity to get the basics of life as a prerequisite to improving their circumstances. The legislation transferred total financial responsibility for four people-related services — health, education, welfare and justice — to the province. Municipalities were left only with the financial and delivery responsibility for property-related services.



The interior of the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly

There was strong reaction to the program from the better-off areas of the province for obvious reasons. There was also reaction because the outcome was, in general, that funds were transferred from anglophone areas to francophone areas. Nevertheless, the legislation was passed and equal opportunity has been in place for 23 years. The laws have been progressively fine-tuned since the highly centralized original regime and are now well accepted.

Few, if any, other jurisdictions on the continent provide such a consistency in the level of basic public services to all, and I emphasize all, as are now delivered in New Brunswick.

External factors

The events, forces and conflicting visions in other provinces on the subject of language and on Quebec affect New Brunswick. One example is that people of the province share in any great national debate and are concerned about the outcome. Being one of the founding provinces, New Brunswick has always been comfortable with a strong national government. At the same time, they have a long-standing relationship with Quebecers and are sensitive to their concerns. Given their unique history of passing progressive laws on official languages, New Brunswickers have felt free and perhaps even obligated to express and press their views and visions of Canada.

A second effect of external factors has been their influence on debate within the province. Examples of perceived or actual intolerance elsewhere by one language group against the other are magnified and internalized in New Brunswick. The recent "sign" issue in Quebec is used by English-only advocates in New Brunswick to justify their views. Anti-French moves by Ontario municipalities and in the legislatures of Saskatchewan and Alberta increase the insecurity of New Brunswick francophones. The possibility of the breakup of Canada is seen as a great threat.

At the individual level, perceived insensitive application of language policy and questionable appointments in the federal public service in New Brunswick have been unsettling on more than one occasion. Just one example: the Fredericton airport is operated by the federal ministry of transport and Commissionaires provide the first level of security, offering advice, information and assistance to the public. The commissionaires are generally older men, veterans and proud to have a job to maintain their financial

independence. In Fredericton, they are unilingual. A federal directive was issued that the service had to be bilingual. A great uproar was created, raising the spectre of these fine unilingual veterans being done out of a job in favour of bilingual persons — francophones obviously. Of the thousands of management decisions made annually by both levels of government, there are many such opportunities for misunderstanding and administrative error. Occasionally they become perceived publically as examples of grievous threat and are used by one side or the other to reinforce a point of view.

One final question is how external factors concerning language influence attitudes about the strictly New Brunswick issue. Do New Brunswickers feel that, no matter what happens elsewhere, they have a unique problem that they must solve for themselves. Historically, the answer has clearly been "yes". That is perhaps less certain now, but I am optimistic that the answer will continue to be "yes".

The Current Political Scene

As mentioned earlier, in 1974 the Department of Education was divided into English and French units. A new *Schools Act* in 1981 established 27 English-language and 15 French-language school districts. New Brunswick's education system is definitely the most comprehensive in Canada in terms of linguistic equality.

These changes have permitted curriculum and materials to be sensitive to each culture, and all controversial aspects of the education function to be managed and delivered by people who are part of each culture. Previous tensions in a number of communities have been dissipated by this refinement.

French immersion is very popular, as you would expect. It is available in all school districts and demand has continued to grow rapidly. Fully 16,335 of the 89,649 students in the English system this year are in full immersion programs — 18 percent of the school population, which is the largest percentage in Canada. The first products of this system are either in the work force or coming out of university in growing numbers. They are already having a leavening effect on language tensions.

Another area of sensitivity is employment in the civil service. In 1988 the government issued its policy on official languages. The policy is in two parts: the language of service to the public, and the language of work.

The policy requires all departments and agencies to have the institutional capability to meet their obligation in both parts. This is being done by requiring "teams" to

be defined and have the team, rather than each employee, meet the obligation. Using this approach, positions are in general not identified by language requirement. This is in contrast to the federal government approach which designates every position by language. All teams are to be functioning with their planned capability by September 1993.

All government departments have spent over a year designing their teams and analyzing how they will meet their obligation under the policy. A detailed report on the current plans of each government department was recently made public. The results make clear that the goal is achievable. Reaction by employees and others has generally been positive.

There are 12,000 civil service positions. For all but 702, the current language capability is not changed. About 430 of the 702 people will be offered language training, while 268 positions must be filled by hiring or transfer. That is two percent of the total.

Staffing of positions in Fredericton is particularly sensitive in that it is where most policy and management functions are and, therefore, the best opportunities for senior positions. For francophones, it means moving to a non-francophone community. There are 4,127 positions in Fredericton. Action is required on 459 of them, with 171 needing staffing. That is four percent of the total.

There has been steady progress in making courts and administrative tribunals offer services in both languages. At present 12 of the 27 provincial court judges and 15 of the 28 Court of Queen's Bench judges are bilingual. The province has recently announced that it will introduce legislation ensuring people can appear before administrative tribunals, such as the workers compensation board and the liquor licensing board, without interpreters.

The Controversy: The Disaffected Subculture

Significant changes in society are not accomplished without problems. What are the sources of these tensions? One is fear. There is a fear that public service employees will have to be bilingual and only franco-New Brunswickers will fill them. There is fear even that the goal of franco-New Brunswickers is the takeover of the government, a variation on the same fear expressed about the national government and the subject of a book in the 1970's, *Bilingual Today: French Tomorrow*. There is a strong feeling in some people that public spending is skewed to francophone areas and fear that the trend is increasing...an example of the perceived takeover.

There is also general concern about the economy and jobs in the private sector. New Brunswick has had unemployment rates in the 10-14 percent range for many

years. The economy has always been vulnerable to global economic forces, the state of the American and central Canadian economies, and to exchange rate changes plus other factors. It is convenient to blame the English-French issue for what has diverse and complex causes.

There are serious language tensions currently in New Brunswick. The tensions have led to the creation of a new registered political party, the Confederation of Regions Party, dedicated to removing all rights based on the French language. There is no doubt that it is considered acceptable to say things, write things and print things that we have not seen for a long time.

The bilingualism program is considered to be very expensive. If funds are available, many people feel that other public programs such as roads, debt reduction, teachers and hospital beds should be a higher priority.

Finally there are those who see Canada as a unilingual country based on the defeat of the French on the Plains of Abraham in 1759. To them, there is neither the slightest rationale to do anything special for the French nor any legal or moral obligation toward them.

The people who express extreme views on this matter are determined: their minds are made up. They have "facts" of which they are certain and they have built mythology around them. Loyalist myths reinforce their conviction. I am using "myth" here in the same sense that Walter Lippmann did when he said, "the distinguishing part of a myth is that truth and error, fact and fable, report and fantasy, are all on the same plane of credibility."

It is hard to know how many people hold extreme views. The views of the anglophone populace cover the spectrum from strong support for the official languages policy to extreme opposition to it. One recent poll suggests 20 percent of New Brunswick anglophones oppose the policy. That is not high, but definitely too high for comfort.

Who are these people? That too is hard to know. They probably represent a cross-section of rural and urban people and cover the economic and social spectrum. After all, people can have a variety of motives behind their common views on this subject. The only point that seems to be agreed is that, on average, supporters of the more extreme views tend to be older citizens.

The Confederation of Regions Party has become the party of protest on this subject. Some 2,500 people attended the founding convention last year. It has some 20,000 members. Its president is a former cabinet minister. The leader is a soft-spoken person who communicates reassuringly, at least if you're English-speaking. The party insists that it is not a one-issue party and is developing policy positions on other issues. It probably has, or could obtain, the funding needed to run a serious campaign. The party intends to run candidates in most ridings. A poll in February of voting intentions indicated that twelve percent of voters would vote for the COR party if an election were held then.

The three mainline parties all support the bilingual vision of New Brunswick. There has been no political home, until now, for those who opposed the vision. There is an official vacuum in the politics of the province because there are no opposition members in the legislature. The COR party competes equally and rather effectively for headlines. One could see it electing some members at the next general election.

However, it is no longer a bed of roses for the COR party and its supporters. Now that it has official status, statements by its leaders are given closer scrutiny. Like all politicians, sometimes their flights of rhetoric get them in trouble and open them to effective criticism. Francophones have protested the more extreme statements with moderation, but have stayed generally quiet. Moderate francophones have challenged moderate anglo New Brunswickers to deal with the COR party, just as Acadian moderates dealt with the separatist Parti Acadien in the 1970's.

There is evidence of that happening. Letters to press editors and editorial comment are challenging supposed facts in letters from the COR party and its supporters. Leaders in several walks of life are praising the virtues of brotherhood, tolerance and generosity in newspapers, the pulpit and on the podium. Communities are twinning. Dialogues are being organized between Chambers of Commerce, youth and senior groups and service clubs. Exchanges are increasing. The mainline parties, starting with the premier, are attacking the values, visions and erroneous statements of the COR party head on. None of these things were being done a year ago.

Other issues

These comments would not be complete without mentioning certain other issues. One is isolation between the two cultures. The creation of independent education systems has reduced the opportunities for student

interaction. A youngster can more easily go through his or her school years and not rub shoulders with someone from the opposite language group. That is a concern. Further, francophones have split away from a number of English-dominated provincial associations because their concerns were not being met. Again, this has advantages but has serious disadvantages also. I think you will see actions to reduce the tendency toward isolation resulting from structural changes. In addition, habits that have kept each culture from knowing the other will be attacked in several ways: exchanges, conferences, tourism, etc.

A number of public services are not yet subject to legal provisions on language. These include professional societies, hospitals, municipalities and utilities. In general, they are reacting to the wave of change constructively and without coercion. But it is doubtful that francophones will be satisfied to not have legal rights in these areas and to risk being treated in a second-class way. And there is a deeper concern. At some point, when there are a large number of bilingual anglophones, will Acadians feel secure that people of their culture will get key public posts, or may people of the other culture get them? This is the reverse of the problem now, but one which is already creating fear among anglophones.

Conclusion

I am very optimistic for the future of New Brunswick. The people are moderate, and modest in the best sense of the word. They are generous. They have a track record of absorbing and accepting change. Most understand and accept that a better balance between anglophones and francophones is necessary. They know language policy is an area in which they lead Canada and have obligations to set an example. They know that knowledge of more than one language can be an asset. I see no workable alternative to meeting the reasonable expectations of 240,000 people who are educated, determined and have the law and moral authority behind them.

At a conference last winter, Mme. Antonine Maillet, a writer, winner of the Prix Goncourt and probably the best known New Brunswicker, attempted to describe her fellow citizens. She said that they are neither Acadians nor loyalists nor natives. They are New Brunswickers. They all have been shaped by the intermingling of the three cultures over eight generations and in infinite ways directly and indirectly; and shaped by the sea; by being a peripheral people; by history and by the natural environment. Taken together, these forces make New Brunswickers distinctly different. I am confident in the wisdom of the people to continue to build on their positive, forward-looking tradition.