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# Bilingualism in the National Capital Region

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by Senator Normand Grimard

*After thirty years the Official Languages Act has enabled bilingualism to hold its ground in Canada, and even extended it somewhat in Parliament, the public service, culture and everyday life. Despite these benefits hostility has not diminished over time. Furthermore, the government has been recently accused of complacency because in transferring services to the provincial governments or private enterprise, it has not always demanded the appropriate maximum safeguards to protect the language rights of the minorities being served. Recent debates over the survival of the Montfort Hospital in Ottawa and the decision of the Ontario government to turn down political and popular pressures to give the new megacity of Ottawa an initial bilingual statute as recommended by a federal parliamentary committee have added more proof of the fragility of the language issue for Francophones outside Quebec. In this article, Senator Grimard offers a realistic, amusing and occasionally provocative look at bilingualism in the National Capital Region.*

I have been a Member of the Senate of Canada for ten years now, and I have noted a number of things about bilingualism in the National Capital. First, there is an unofficial mathematical formula: if five francophones are talking together in French and one anglophone happens by, the entire group will start speaking English. The majority is no longer in the majority. It bows to the minority. Sometimes, the opposite effect occurs: it is French that prevails. But that is a vastly rarer phenomenon, usually shorter in duration, and usually premised on the anglophone in question having taken language courses and consciously wanting to "practice" his or her French.

Is an official publication about to come out? The final touches will involve checking the quality of the English so that it is perfect. Less attention is paid to the French



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*A lawyer, Normand Grimard was appointed to the Senate in 1990. He is author of *L'indispensable Sénat : Défense d'une institution mal aimée*, Éditions Vent d'Ouest, Hull, 1995.*

version. At meetings, when it comes to both oral communication and written materials, English prevails over French. For instance, when an official report is quoted during a debate in one of the two Houses of Parliament or in a committee, which language will be used? The reason for this is a wholly justifiable reluctance to complicate the discussion unnecessarily. Time is a very precious commodity. In practice, what happens, however, is that the version most often quoted is the one in the language of the majority, and gradually the English expressions end up taking over, except in cases where the vagaries of the language lead to wild interpretations.

For instance, unless one is an inveterate entertainer, addressing "la chaise" or "le fauteuil" has no meaning in French. In correct French, one does not speak to a chair or an armchair, inanimate objects both; one addresses the Speaker or the chairperson who presides over the debates of an assembly. Nonetheless, this peculiar use of the expression "the chair" is perfectly acceptable in English – it is encouraged, legitimised and hallowed by centuries of practice. A committee on which I sat recently proposed that the French versions of expressions such as "the chair" be corrected in the Senate Rules, the French version of which dates from March 1996.

Francophone members of Parliament often find they must upgrade their knowledge of English, or even come to speak it as a reflex in order to be more effective in debate. Speaking in one's own language means having to use simultaneous interpretation services, and the interpretation can be delivered by a man when a woman is speaking, and vice versa.

***Parliamentary speeches have much less impact when experienced through a headset.***

The ease with which francophones are able to make their mark in Ottawa varies widely, depending on their place of origin. In the ebb and flow of oratory, where facility in English carries weight, Franco-Ontarians, Acadians or francophones from other provinces are often more successful than francophones whose origins lie in Quebec, because their ears are already attuned to the language of Shakespeare. They even have the proper accent! That is an extremely important detail in a city where eloquence is part of daily life, and where the opinions of the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* count more than those of *Le Devoir* or *La Presse*.

Because English is dominant, and is still the language read and spoken most often (32% of the population speak

French in the national capital's metropolitan region: 14% in Ottawa proper and 80% in Hull), we cannot count on Ottawa businesses, either on the Byward Market or at the Rideau Centre, to breathe any new life into French in Ontario. French has suffered setbacks in the last ten years, rather than experiencing growth. When neither the Ottawa-Carleton police nor the Ottawa Hospital consider it essential to include a full knowledge of French in the selection standards for the Chief of the first or the President of the second, the uncertain standing of French is apparent.

### **A Bit of History**

Canada will never be as bilingual as some dreamers would like. However, a look at history shows that it is more bilingual than the Péquistes (and members of the Bloc Québécois) claim.

The arrival of the French in 1534 was followed by the founding of Quebec City in 1608. Sixty thousand French settlers were living in Canada at the time of England's conquest of New France in 1760. A major breakthrough was created with the *Quebec Act, 1774*, explaining in part the kind of Canada we have today. André Burelle writes that the British Parliament conceded the right to preserve the French language, the Catholic religion, the civil law and the seigniorial system "to distract the newly conquered French Canadians from the revolution that was brewing in its American colonies".<sup>1</sup> The Canadian federation of 1867 reinforced these guarantees. It restored a portion of the rights that the *1840 Act of Union* had tried to abolish: after a forced twenty-seven year merger with Ontario, Quebec's separate existence was restored and once again it became the home of French Canadians. John A. Macdonald neither read nor spoke French<sup>2</sup> but the partnership between Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier, Quebec's loyal mentor, led to Confederation in 1867 and sealed the deal between English Canadians and French Canadians.

John Diefenbaker's bilingual cheques in 1962 may well have been laughable, but they were an important brick in the building of our nation. Canada still dons its bilingualism hat, particularly when it wants to differentiate itself from the United States, where the "melting pot" concept smoothes out cultural differences with all the finesse of a bulldozer.

In both Parliament and the Quebec Legislature, the use of French was originally mandatory in statutes and official journals. It was even possible to use either language in the courts of both Canada and Quebec. The *1969 Official Languages Act* recognised that English and French are the two official languages of Canada, and allows every

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Canadian to address the federal government in the official language of his or her choice. The *Constitution Act, 1982* strengthened those provisions and assigned "equal" status to the French and English versions of statutes and other documents published by Parliament. That Act also entrenched official bilingualism in New Brunswick. However, those guarantees have never claimed to prescribe that everything must take place in both languages in the federal capital or in the institutions in question.

Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson laid the groundwork for official bilingualism and his successor, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, continued to expand on the policy and gave it its present form. The Conservative government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney presided over the rejuvenation and reconfirmation of the Act, in 1988. Since its inception, it has been possibly one of the most misunderstood programs of the federal government. The classic example of how bilingualism irritates some English Canadians is bilingual advertising on their cereal boxes: "We don't want French shoved down our throats." The other criticism that is unfortunately heard at times is the belief that francophones, who make up 24% of the population of Canada, will ultimately, if not imminently, take over the country, according to the most obstinate opponents of language rights. In fact, these kinds of advances are certainly not discernible in the day-to-day activities of the federal public service, where many francophones still do not have the option of working in their own language, without jeopardizing their personal file or career plan.

One area in which there has been noticeable change is the co-drafting of bills, which are now written simultaneously in French and English. The objective of producing "two original and authentic versions" is more consistent with the spirit of the *Official Languages Act*. A 1995 Department of Justice publication states: "In co-drafting, neither version is a translation of the other. In contrast to the traditional approach of translation, one version is not unchangeable. The two drafters often prompt each other to change or improve their versions".<sup>3</sup> The growing popularity of legislative translation programs in universities and the provision of more and better training for Francophone drafters have eliminated anglicisms, which were formerly common, while the new acceptance of the use of pronouns often simplifies and shortens the French version of federal statutes. In English, however, the practice is to continue repeating the nouns, regardless of how often, to eliminate any risk of confusion, as is necessary in that language.

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### Some Demographic Facts

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According to Statistics Canada, the rate of French-English bilingualism rose from 13.5% to 17% between 1971 and 1996, an increase of not more than 3.5%. However, it should be noted that in 25 years the proportion of bilingual anglophones in Quebec has risen from 37% to 61%, bringing us close to the day when that percentage will have doubled. The number of francophones who speak both languages rose from 26% to only 34%, in the same period. Thirty years of life under the federal *Official Languages Act* has neither changed Canada beyond recognition nor perverted its true nature! In 1996, Newfoundland still had a bilingualism rate under 5%, and Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia were all under 10%. Two provinces are above that mark by so little that it may not be worth mentioning them: Prince Edward Island, at 11%, and Ontario, at 11.6% – although the situation in that province is still unique because its population is so large. Still, New Brunswick and Quebec bring the largest contingent of bilingual individuals to Canada, with 32.6% and 37.8% of their populations, respectively. On the other hand, 1971 saw the advent of multiculturalism as another thread in the fabric of our national heritage, and it has reduced the impact of the official recognition of French and English by apparently giving all cultures, in law if not in fact, the right to be different.

While Canadians take pride in rejecting the "melting pot" policy as it is practised south of the border the shrinking Francophone population in Canada is quite properly a source of concern for the people whose ancestors were the first to arrive in these frozen lands, on sailing ships flying the flag of the King of France. In 1951, there were four million francophones, accounting for 29% of the population of Canada. In 1991, they totalled 6.5 million, but accounted for only 24.3%. According to the 1996 census, the figure has since fallen below 24%.

Having made that assertion, I do not think I would go so far as Prime Minister Jean Chrétien who in an interview before the 8th Francophonie Summit held in Moncton in September 1999, asserted that assimilation "is a fact of life. In a sense, there are people who do not believe in it, so they get lazy. It happened somewhat to the Catholic religion. These things happen." The Prime Minister went on: "On the other hand, there are new French speakers coming on the scene. And still, there are seven million francophones in Canada, a million of whom are outside Quebec, and that is not insignificant. I am told that there are two million anglophone Canadians who use French on a daily basis. That didn't happen 25 years ago. That's evolution. There are ups and downs."<sup>4</sup>

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The numbers of French-speaking Canadians in the other provinces fell for the first time, in absolute numbers, in the 1996 census: from 976,415 to 970,170. While they represented 7.3% of the total population of English Canada in 1951, in 1996 they accounted for only 4.5% – or perhaps only 2.9%, if the language used in the home is considered. Given the threat inherent in this kind of change, renewed attention has recently been focused on the application of the *Official Languages Act*.

### The Challenge to Francophone Survival

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Whether we like it or not, industrialisation has made the survival of French-Canadian minorities outside Quebec more complicated. Working on an assembly line in a plant presupposes a higher level of use of a shared language than just tending to the crops on one's own land. Globalisation and the Internet intensify the changes occurring in customs and cultures, and the share allotted to the French language has shrunk a little more.

Keith Spicer was the first Commissioner of Official Languages. In his 1970-1971 annual report, he set the tone that is still followed in those reports: criticising places where bilingualism is lacking with gentle irony, framing it all in an undeniably literary style. However, he also reported pragmatically: "Perhaps it is inevitable that in Ottawa, particularly, the climate surrounding bilingualism should be far from serene: after all, in this administrative capital, bilingualism is no distant matter of theory, it concerns jobs and careers right now." The same direct style was used in the reports of the Commissioners who followed: Max Yalden, D'Iberville Fortier and Victor C. Goldbloom, who has just been replaced, as this is being written, by Dr. Dyane Adam, a Franco-Ontarian.

***Transfer agreements have not always been clear about the scope of language rights.***

Bilingualism has made progress in Canada in the last thirty years, but the last decade has brought a new area of concern for the Commissioner of Official Languages. The federal government has withdrawn from a number of its responsibilities by transferring them either to private enterprise or to the provinces, but without forcefully insisting that services to official language minority groups be maintained. It is even harder for the government, which was not doing a perfect job of monitoring

what went on in its own back yard, to maintain discipline in its neighbour's back yard.

In 1998, in view of the alarm expressed by the Commissioner of Official Languages, the government formed the Task Force chaired by Yvon Fontaine to investigate the effects of these government transformations and their impact on official languages. In January 1999, the Task Force presented its report to the Minister, Marcel Massé, who was then President of the Treasury Board. Although the title, *No Turning Back*, was intended to be positive, the somewhat negative content of the document suggests that a more accurate title would actually have been "Getting Back on Course". The analysis reports the grievances of minority groups, and charges that the authorities have been complicit in the lax approach being taken, by giving the green light to privatizations and transfers to the provinces without securing adequate guarantees. To remedy this situation, the Fontaine Task Force concluded: "The relationship between the government and linguistic minorities cannot rest on the efforts of a few people or organisations with whom the government has chosen to work." Further on, it said: "all institutions of Parliament and of the Government of Canada must be empowered and made accountable for their actions in support of linguistic duality and minority official language communities."

Senator Jean-Maurice Simard recently raised a question in the Upper House denouncing what he calls the gradual deterioration of services in French to Francophones outside Quebec over the last ten years. Senator Simard, who comes from New Brunswick, drew attention to the rapid rate of assimilation outside Quebec. He accused the government of endorsing a form of cultural "ethnic cleansing", as reported in *The Gazette* on January 10, 1999. Senator Noël A. Kinsella supported Senator Simard, and in a speech on May 13, 1999 he said it was unfortunate that the demands of zero deficit targets and globalisation had been set up as a bar to justify the erosion of services in French.

In a broader context, Canada's linguistic duality is under attack from another side: advocates of Quebec independence who, for partisan reasons, regard French-Canadians in other provinces as just a lot of bodies that, while they may still be warm, are destined to be dragged toward Anglicisation. Peering through the same narrow lens, they predict the disappearance of French in Montreal, and perhaps even in Quebec as a whole, in the medium term. For their part, many Reform MPs from the West would abolish the Official Languages Program and, to save money, would halt all federal contributions to language courses and the propagation of Francophone culture.

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In December, 1999, the Ontario government gave two more examples of how French is under attack. At that time, that government created the amalgamated City of Ottawa without an official bilingual statute. Queen's Park discarded political and popular pressures, a trend favourable to bilingualism in four of the 11 cities involved and a local poll also supporting it by 88%.<sup>5</sup> It also turned down a recommendation in the same vein coming from the Standing Joint Committee on Official Languages: confirmed on division in the House of Commons and unanimously in the Senate. Another motion by Senator Jean-Robert Gauthier was also adopted on December 16, 1999. The future Council of the legal community of 750,000 inhabitants will determine its linguistic status.

The Ontario government has also rekindled debate concerning Ottawa's French language Montfort Hospital. The government appealed a first level judgement upholding the survival of the only French-speaking training medical hospital in Ontario, and went against the recommendation of a commission which had studied health services earlier in the year and proposed closing Monfort.

It is far off the mark to assume that because a Member of Parliament can order his two eggs sunny side up with bacon in French every morning in the Parliamentary cafeteria that bilingualism in the national capital is in good shape. There are countless difficulties that must be met for bilingualism to flourish and too many examples where bilingualism has utterly failed. That, in my opinion, is why Parliament and the government must continue to take the lead to ensure the permanence of the *Official Languages Act*. We have been allowing Canada's reputation in this area to deteriorate, little by little over the past decade.

#### Notes

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1. *Le mal canadien*, p. 33.
2. See Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, p. 14.
3. *A Guide to the Making of Federal Acts and Regulations*, p. 115.
4. See *Le Devoir* Week-end Edition August 28-29, 1999.
5. See the *Ottawa Citizen*, December 21, 1999.