



Bilingualism: A Canadian Challenge

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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism in French and English is a much-to-be hoped for common and shared characteristic of Canadian citizenship—even though to date the effect of forty years of the Official Languages Act has been most marked in government services and among various Canadian elites. Although it is important that Canada hold onto a goal of the widest possible bilingualism, more modest objectives are outlined for the years immediately ahead.

Most countries have national myths, understandings—often based on culture and/or language and/or shared historical experience—that enable citizens to distinguish themselves from citizens of other countries, rather especially from their closest neighbors. For Canada, with the exception of Quebec, the original national myth seems to have been the British imperial connection, i.e., that which distinguished us most clearly from the United States. By the end of World War II, the usefulness of this national myth had worn rather thin if only because it bore so little relationship to the realities of the Canadian street. Indeed, the development of one of our current national myths, multiculturalism, can be understood as a response to the realities of the Canadian streets.

Bilingualism in both of Canada's official languages, French and English, can be thought of as another of our national myths. I would argue, however, that bilingualism can also and better be conceptualized as both an appropriate recognition of Canada's founding European settlers and a much-to-be hoped for common and shared characteristic of Canadian citizenship.

The tension between Canada's French and English language communities is, of course, older than the country itself, and this tension is reflected in the vagueness of the 1867 constitutional arrangements which enable Cartier to focus on the obvious gains for Quebec (its own legislature, government, and so forth), while at the same time George Brown actually wrote that Confederation's great accomplishment was that French Canadians had been extinguished! It is against this unpromising background that I believe that the major effect of the Official Languages Act—along with Quebec's Bill 101—has, in fact, saved Canada for the English language community.

Although it is clearly true that there are many more Canadians bilingual in French and English than used to be the case, I have to admit that the effect of just over forty years of the federal Official Languages Act outside of the very special cases of Quebec and New Brunswick has been most marked in both government service(s) and/or among the various Canadian elites. Relative to these special areas, it has clearly become the case that the second official language is, in fact, the "langue d'ambition." In this respect Canada would not be the only country in which group differences are resolved not between the groups themselves but through the circulation of elites at the top.

This result, even if not sufficient, is clearly worth celebrating, and I am grateful for the progress that has been made. I would, however, hope for more with respect to Canada and bilingualism. This goal of bilingualism in French and English for all Canadians will be difficult to achieve if only because the reality of the street in so many Canadian communities has little to do with two official languages. Not only is there precious little opportunity for speaking French in Canada outside of Quebec and New Brunswick, but also in more than one Canadian community, there is a significant language community that is neither French nor English.

I would, therefore, be satisfied if in the years immediately ahead, we would adopt two more modest objectives. First, a greatly improved availability of all government services (federal, provincial, municipal) in both French and English. In this area, a great deal of progress has already been made, but it will require commitment and determination to sustain and build upon. Second, Canada's education establishments need, finally, to recognize their own opportunities and responsibilities with respect to the promotion of our two official languages. It is a national disgrace that our schools, our colleges and our universities do not insist on—or in many cases even bother to encourage—bilingualism in French and English as a criterion of graduation.

It is true that Canadian elementary and secondary schools have done a better job in this respect than either Canada's colleges or its universities. Canada's second official language is more widely taught in our elementary and secondary schools than was previously the case, and immersion programs in the second official language have been a very welcome development. Canada's colleges and universities are, however, a complete failure in this area. Not only have they not adjusted their curricular offerings to take advantage of the increased bilingualism of their entering students, it has also not seemed to occur to them the great national service they could perform by insisting on (or at least encouraging) bilingualism as a standard of a "Canadian" graduation. Citizenship has, after all, not only advantages but also responsibilities.

It is not only a question of linguistic competence. Canada needs from our schools, our colleges and our universities more widespread and much deeper teaching of second language and culture partly as a recognition of the challenges and value of this learning and partly as their contribution to the major investments that Canadians all must make in improving the relationships between the two official language communities at the local, provincial and national levels.

The challenge of forward movement in our schools, colleges and universities is considerable if only because so many Canadians have psychologically experienced the Official Languages Act and such legislation as Quebec's Bill 101 not as a potentially exciting opening to a commonly enriched future but rather as an act of government oppression if not, on an even uglier basis, of ethnic cleansing. The objectives of such legislation can, in fact, be seen and understood in such a negative light, but there is no need to do so. Whatever the initial motivation may have been, the challenge to our future, hopefully, our shared future, remains to be met.

In terms of the political future of Canada, my assessment is that we are very likely to have more of the same. All this is to say that conceptual neatness was never Canada's strong point, and, moreover, that this lack of conceptual coherence has its advantages as we navigate the difficult shoals of a future likely to be filled with challenges—many not, of course, related to official languages. These negotiations are not going to be either over or easy. We must, however, recognize that with respect to bilingualism in French and English, very real progress has been made. I believe that we would do well to hold on to a goal of the widest possible bilingualism.

We should not, however, be unrealistic in terms of the effects of our efforts. As Yaakov Shabtai (1985) put it in his novel, *Past Continuous*:

Although there was something in men which he called the “redemption instinct,” his life experience has taught him that there was no single act in public or private life, however right or revolutionary, which was redemptive in the sense that from a certain point onward, a new era would commence in which everything would be perfectly good and work out just the way people want it to and at the same time, despite this awareness, it was necessary to live as if redemption were possible and to strive for it. (p. 291)

We must, therefore, not retreat from our responsibilities as Canadians. A flight from responsibility is so often a flight into stupidity, for as Arthur Schnitzler once suggested, the flight into stupidity is unfortunately the most comfortable flight for the journey is not as long as we might fondly imagine. We do not need to take that flight. Sometimes good is good enough—at least for now.

References

- Shabtai, Y. (1985). *Past continuous* (Dalya Bilu, Trans.). Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia. (Original work published 1977)



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Bernard Shapiro is currently Professor of Education and Principal Emeritus of McGill University and was also Canada’s first Ethics Commissioner. Educated at McGill and Harvard universities, Dr. Shapiro has published in the areas of educational policy, program assessment and the development of logical thinking in children. The former president of both the Canadian Society for the Study of Education and the Social Science Federation of Canada, Dr. Shapiro is also the recipient of numerous honorary degrees. He is an officer of both the Order of Canada and the “Ordre National du Québec.”