

Official Bilingualism: From Ambivalence to Embrace

Graham Fraser

The son of legendary newsman and author Blair Fraser, Graham Fraser forged his own career in journalism during the national unity and constitutional wars of the 1970s, 80s and 90s. An anglophone by background, Fraser's fluency in French and understanding of the political nuances around the language issue won the wide respect of francophone media colleagues and made him an outstanding choice for Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages. After a decade in that role, Fraser is stepping aside, leaving his successor with this invaluable status report on how Canadians feel about what is arguably our most distinguishing national characteristic.

Attitudes towards Canada's official languages have come a long way since the Official Languages Act was introduced in 1968 and passed in 1969.

When the OLA was debated in the House of Commons, opponents denounced the legislation as dictatorial, unfair, discriminatory and unconstitutional. One columnist called it "unnecessary, politically motivated, costly to implement, and, as it affects the non-English, non-French third of the population, wholly discriminatory." Around that time, the singing of O Canada in French was booed in Maple Leaf Gardens.

Polling over the years has reflected some of these tensions. In 1963, a majority (61 per cent) of Canadians told Gallup that they did not agree that French Canadians had not been given their full rights under Confederation. In 1967, a strong minority (46.6 per cent) felt that it would not be possible for Canada to achieve

recognition of both French and English in all provinces, while a slight majority (50.2 per cent) felt that it would be possible.

In 1977, a year after the election of the Parti Québécois, only 26 per cent of Canadians outside Quebec said that they agreed with the statement, "I generally agree with or support the principle or spirit of bilingualism," while 54 per cent said "I generally support the principle of bilingualism but I disagree with the form bilingualism has taken under the present federal government," and 11 per cent said "I reject bilingualism in any form." In Quebec, those figures were very different: 54 per cent agreed with bilingualism, 34 per cent qualified it and disagreed with the form of it, and 4 per cent rejected it.

In 2004, Andrew Parkin and André Turcotte said that "the same division of opinion is evident on a variety of questions asked in the past 25 years,"

and pointed out dramatic contrasts in view between francophones and anglophones on whether the federal government should promote bilingualism, whether too much was being done for bilingualism and whether more should be done.

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The survey had two objectives: to gauge current public opinions, perceptions and experiences regarding official languages and bilingualism, and to gather a detailed socio-cultural profile—the habits, attitudes and values—of those who support and those who oppose official languages and bilingualism.

In the words of the report: "A vast majority of Canadians support both



Graham Fraser has seen official languages move from grudging to widespread acceptance in all regions of the country. Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages photo

the Official Languages Act and bilingualism. Although there are some demographic differences in support, every demographic group is more likely to support the OLA, as is the case with bilingualism. Younger adults are more likely to strongly support each.”

The telephone survey found that 88 per cent of Canadians support the aims of the OLA, ranging from a low of 83 per cent in the Prairies to a high of 92 per cent in Quebec. An on-line survey of a non-random sample of respondents—Nielsen finds that people are more likely to be candid on-line—found that support dropped by about 10 points, which still indicates very strong support.

Asks whether the fact of having two official languages contributes favourably to Canada’s international image, 87 per cent of Canadians said “yes” by telephone, and 76 per cent said “yes” on-line. Asked whether they were personally in favour of bilingualism for all of Canada, 84 per cent of Canadians said “yes” by telephone and 74 per cent said “yes” on-line. Asked whether they agreed that since French and English were part of our history, it was logical that they have equal status, 84 per cent of Canadians said “yes” by telephone and 73 per cent said “yes” on-line.

One of the factors that distinguishes supporters from opponents is the ex-

posure that people have to the other official language in their community, through their culture and on their television channels.

The study also found that myths about Canada’s language policies persist, and that a majority of both supporters and opponents believe many of those myths.

For example, 87 per cent of Canadians believe that all federal services must be provided in both languages from coast to coast. In fact, this requirements exists only where the official language minority population is 5 per cent or more of the total population in that area.

“ In yet another example, 49 per cent of Canadians believe that you have to be bilingual to work in the federal public service. In fact, only 40 per cent of public service positions across Canada require bilingualism. In the National Capital Region, where most federal institutions have their headquarters, that number rises to 60 per cent. ”

As another example, 71 per cent of Canadians believe that there are fewer French speakers than speakers of non-official languages. In fact, French is the mother tongue of 22 per cent of Canadians, while 20 per cent speak a non-official language as their mother tongue. And 21 per cent of Canadians speak French at home, compared to 13 per cent who speak a non-official language at home.

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Nielsen found that those who oppose the OLA are more likely to be cynical about government in general and more likely to feel disconnected from government. Members of the on-line panel were divided into three groups.

One group that represented just over a quarter (27 per cent) of respondents included those with “heartland values,” who showed the lowest level of support for the act, who are more ideologically opposed to bilingualism, who are mostly male and middle-aged, who see immigration as a threat to Canadian values, who feel that religious minorities should not be accommodated, who have conservative values and who feel strongly that the push for equal rights has gone too far.

Another group that represented just under a third (32 per cent) of respondents included those who support “traditional Canadian institutions,” who have a high level of support for the act and most aspects of bilingualism, who interact more with the other language, who see Quebec as distinct, who are mostly female, who see immigration as a threat to Canadian values but feel that religious minorities should be accommodated, who have conservative values and who feel that the push for equal rights has gone too far.

The last group, representing 41 per cent of respondents, are those who are “progressive and open,” who have the highest support for the OLA and most aspects of bilingualism, who focus more on equality, who see Quebec as distinct, who are less likely to have misunderstandings about the act, who are mostly female, who are more likely to live in bilingual communities, who think

that immigration is not a threat to Canadian values and feel that religious values should be accommodated, who do not have conservative values and who feel that the push for equal rights has not gone far enough.

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Comparing this survey with others conducted over the past 40 years shows that support for bilingualism is generally inversely proportional to the intensity of the national unity debate. When the debate flared up in 1990 and 1991, support dropped. At the time, less than half of Canadians answered positively to the question of whether they were in favour of bilingualism for all of Canada. Since then, support has climbed steadily and is now nearing 70 per cent.

“ Canada’s gradual acceptance of linguistic duality—or the fact that we have an entire French-speaking society within our borders—has made us more open, more inclusive, and more prepared to accept the arrival of others on our shores and welcome them into our society. This puts us in a significantly different place than the United States, the United Kingdom and some parts of Europe. ”

For the past 10 years, I have argued that Canada’s gradual acceptance of linguistic duality—or the fact that we have an entire French-speaking society within our borders—has made us more open, more inclusive, and more prepared to accept the arrival of others on our shores and welcome them into our society. This puts us in a significantly different place than the United States, the United Kingdom and some parts of Europe.

The poll supports that argument, despite indications of a slice of the population that is strongly negative about both official languages and minorities of all kind that should prevent any sense of smugness or superiority. Nevertheless, for my successor and for political parties, the poll demonstrates that Canadians believe that bilingualism is a prerequisite for political leadership and a reasonable requirement for those who wish to be appointed to the Supreme Court. Eighty-six per cent of Nielsen respondents thought the prime minister should be bilingual. Of the various hard decisions that parties and governments have to make, requiring political leaders and judges on the Supreme Court to be bilingual is clearly not one of them. Canadians understand what some potential political leaders and ambitious lawyers have failed to grasp: there are some jobs in Canada for which bilingualism is an essential leadership competency. **P**

Graham Fraser was Commissioner of Official Languages from 2006-2016. A former journalist, he is the author of several books, including Playing for Keeps: The Making of the Prime Minister, 1988 (1989), and Sorry, I Don’t Speak French, (2006).