



The importance of leadership in implementing language policies

Graham Fraser, Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada

As with many public policies in Canada, its language policy was developed by a Royal Commission, in this case the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. The Commission was set up in 1963 in response to the rise of Quebec nationalism in the early 1960s. Published in 1967, the Commission's first report favoured a version of the Finnish model. Moreover, the Commission recommended recognising English and French as the two official languages of Canada, adopting a law on official languages and appointing a commissioner of official languages to act as an "active conscience".

Saying that Canada is a bilingual country can lead to confusion. Canada is in fact a country that has a policy of official bilingualism. Its language policy was developed to ensure that monolingual French speakers receive the same level of federal government services as monolingual English speakers. That said, do these two languages enjoy "equal status" within the institutions subject to the Official Languages Act (the Act), as required under this Act? No. The use of the two languages does not happen by reflex in designated bilingual workplaces.

Nevertheless, there are elements of success. Leadership is a key success factor. Firstly, there is political leadership. Since 1968, all of Canada's prime ministers have been bilingual. Since 1984, bilingualism has been accepted as an essential quality for becoming the leader of a political party. Next, there is administrative leadership. If senior officials set the example in their relations with employees and in their messages by using the two official languages, if they show that usage of both languages is valued and that services are provided effectively in both languages, then the message sent to the organisation is quickly understood.

When the Act was amended in 1988, the right to work in the language of one's choice in designated bilingual regions was introduced in Part V of the Act. We could go so far as to say that at that time, we had not fully realised the extent to which granting this right to employees was a radical move.

To conclude, let's try to answer the main question of this conference: is language policy the same as any other public policy? In Canada, one could say it is not. In fact, it is of course a public policy, but not like any other. Our language policy is connected to our values and identity. What's more, we decided to enshrine certain language rights contained in the Act in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This means that key policy aspects are not at risk with a change of government. The Act represents a number of obligations, but it also represents a collective will to become a more open and inclusive country. It is a regulatory policy and one of aspiration which requires and inspires, which is idealist and practical while also being symbolic and pragmatic.

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A well-known and respected journalist and author with almost 40 years of journalistic experience, Graham Fraser studied at the University of Toronto, where he was awarded a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in History. He was appointed Commissioner of Official Languages in October 2006 for a seven-year term. In October 2013, he was reappointed for another three years.

The Commissioner's mandate is to promote Canada's two official languages and to protect the language rights of official language communities. Since the start of his term, Graham Fraser has been involved in many important issues concerning the language rights of Canadians.

Under Graham Fraser, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada has addressed major language matters such as the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. The Commissioner intervened in the action brought in 2007 by the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada against the abolition of the Court Challenges Program of Canada. In 2008, the Commissioner also intervened in the Nguyen case, in which the Supreme Court's interpretation took into account the interests of official language communities with regard to the rights guaranteed by section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Graham Fraser is the author of five books, the most recent of which, *Sorry, I Don't Speak French*, was published in March 2006 and helped to stimulate renewed public discussion of language policy in Canada.