



**Linda Leith remarks to OCOL Part VII Forum
March 9, 2011**

Commissioner Fraser, Madame Kenney, esteemed representatives from the Government of Canada, colleagues from the Quebec Community Groups Network, and leaders from the English and French linguistic minority communities of Canada, good morning. We are very excited to be here today to join with you in a discussion on Part VII of the Official Languages Act. We are also grateful to the Commissioner for his initiative and hospitality and to the many federal government officials who are our supporting stakeholders for taking the time to join this forum today.

We believe that as Canadians, there exists a collective interest in supporting and furthering the purposes of our Official Languages Act. In the words of our Prime Minister, “linguistic duality is a cornerstone of our national identity”, and our two official languages must enjoy equality of status and equal rights and privileges in public life. This goal can only be achieved by ensuring the vitality and sustainability of the English and French linguistic minority communities, in which the two languages and the unique cultures they maintain are nurtured and protected. The Prime Minister clearly committed the Government of Canada to this purpose in his introduction to the *Roadmap for Canada’s Linguistic Duality*.

Canada’s Constitution outlines the language rights which our governments have a duty to ensure. But this responsibility is not governments’ alone. Our linguistic minority communities have a responsibility to the Nation and future generations to make sure that we continue to reap the tremendous benefits of English and French as official languages. Our communities must demonstrate initiative and self-awareness, and must organize and communicate our needs and priorities in as clear and coordinated a way as possible. We must remember our pasts with a constant eye to the future and the best interests of our young people. We must also resist the temptation to isolate ourselves, instead finding ways to fully contribute to the national fabric while maintaining our distinctiveness.

We know that Canada’s linguistic minority communities share common concerns regarding the architecture that supports our two official languages. We want seamless implementation of the Official Languages Act the way the legislation was intended, and a strengthening of oversight mechanisms including the Commissioner’s responsibilities and powers to ensure government compliance. Linguistic duality is a core Canadian value, and should underlay every government activity. For this reason, responsibility for the coordination of the Government of Canada’s commitment to official languages should rest in a central department -- and we believe that must be the Privy Council Office.

We also want our interests protected in inter-governmental arrangements – language clauses that tie federal money to federal statutory responsibilities. As taxpayers, we also want full visibility and accountability of federal funds provided the provinces for the benefit of our linguistic minority communities.

We are not naive. We understand that Canada’s official language architecture exists in the same space as other core national interests. The English-speaking Community of Quebec certainly understands the delicate nature of this political reality. We know that the Government of Canada’s commitments to enhancing our community’s vitality must be undertaken while respecting provincial jurisdiction and power. We also know that the Government of Canada does not have direct constitutional jurisdiction in

many areas of concern to our community. However, we also happily have firsthand experience with the willingness, imagination, initiative and talent of individuals within the Government and Parliament of Canada to reach out and help our linguistic minority community. We especially note the proactive and caring efforts of Canadian Heritage, and the innovation of Citizenship Immigration Canada. The English-speaking Community of Quebec also receives excellent support from Health Canada through the Government of Quebec in a mechanism that ensures community voice and participation. We are well served by an amazing network of Community Learning Centres, which are supported by federal resources through the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. Parks Canada works with effectively with some of our communities, ensuring they are included in Parks' field unit activities.

We know that the Government of Canada is committed to the vitality of our community, and appreciate the challenges of making programmes and services accessible to us. After all, every federal institution has the duty to ensure that positive measures are taken for the implementation of the Government's commitments to our linguistic minority communities, whether they receive specific program funding or responsibilities or not. That is why we are so happy with the collaborative nature of today's forum, and wish to acknowledge the excellent work of the Commissioner's Office in the event's design.

These remarks began by mentioning the role of Canada's linguistic minority communities in maintaining our linguistic duality, and continued with areas of common interest that we share with French linguistic minority communities. Before we start today however, it is worth noting the unique situation of the English-speaking Community of Quebec.

First, we are not a community with a threatened language. We are however a community whose common language is considered by many a clear and present danger to the existence of French. The consequences of this are profound, and asymmetrically affect our community's relationship with the federal and provincial governments, and the reality of our capacity to enjoy our constitutional language rights.

Second, we are a community bent on integration, not on defending ourselves against assimilation. This colours our approach. Confrontation has not worked well for us in the past, and in any event is antithetical to our common goal of obtaining political, social, and economic inclusion. Moreover, we are a community that began forty years ago with strong institutions, and supposedly a privileged place within provincial public life. Interpretations of our official language architecture that look back to remedy the injustices of the past or seek to be remedial in nature do not serve the unique interests of our community.

Third, although some of our constituent parts like the Black Community in Montreal go back centuries, the English-speaking Community of Quebec is a community of communities whose unique histories have made them quite independent and uncomfortable with collective action. We remain a heterogeneous collective; a diverse community in which more than 25% of our members also belong to a visible minority.

Our community has historically been divided by class, the shadows of which can still be seen and felt. And we are mostly urban, metropolitan in fact. Nearly 80% of us live within the Montreal Census Metropolitan Area. Our common institutions include urban and rural, new and old, privileged and marginalized.