



# The Best-Treated Minority in the World

Historical and discursive analysis of a cliché

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The word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag to the right of the letter "a".



The logo for Concordia University, featuring a stylized red and white shield icon to the left of the word "Concordia" in a serif font.

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Caricature of John Diefenbaker and Jacques Parizeau in *The Gazette*, April 23, 1988.

Note that no evidence was found of either Diefenbaker or Parizeau ever using the "best-treated minority" phrase.

# Introduction

Politicians, polemicists, and others have long referred to Quebec’s English-speaking community as the “best-treated minority in the world.”<sup>1</sup> This loaded phrase has also been used to describe other minorities: French speakers within Canada as a whole, Indigenous peoples in Canada, and religious groups and minorities in many European and colonial contexts.

Through a historical overview and discourse analysis, this paper traces how the phrase has been used and abused, justified, and criticized over time. The particular focus is the Quebec context. There, we see a shift from a largely consensual use of the phrase across all language groups to one that becomes increasingly divisive and problematic from the 1980s on. This shift parallels the English-speaking community’s evolving sense of itself as a minority in decline.

## Methodology

### Sources

The main information source for this paper is a sample of digitized articles, letters, and editorials from Quebec periodicals. It includes material originally published between the years 1886 and 2019. The sample consists of 157 articles in English and 101 articles in French.

I initially searched the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec’s (BAnQ) digitized collection of magazines and newspapers.<sup>2</sup> This is a full-text searchable database of 725 French-language periodicals, 80 English-language periodicals, and 8 in other languages, all printed in Quebec and dating back to the 1700s. I used the search terms “best-treated minority,”<sup>3</sup> “minorité la mieux traitée” and other synonymous terms (see limitations section below). This search yielded 146 results in English and 4,320 in French. The BAnQ search engine operates by keywords rather than exact phrase, then prioritizes results according to proximity of the keywords, so many of the results lower in the list were irrelevant to the research topic. I then gathered a sample of up to a dozen relevant articles per decade in each language, excluding duplicates or similar articles from similar dates.

- 1 Although English speakers are a majority in Canada, they are recognized by the federal government as an official language minority community in Quebec, where the majority of people speak French. Francophones in other majority English-speaking provinces are also recognized as official language minority communities.
- 2 See: <https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/ressources/details/RJQ>.
- 3 The phrase was entered with and without a hyphen.

This method yielded fewer than a dozen articles per decade prior to 1960. This is in part because of the inferior quality of optical character recognition (OCR) for older newspapers, which were often digitized earlier, at lower resolutions, and using secondary lower-quality microfiche sources. It may also suggest that the phrase was not used as frequently in this period. The BAnQ database also contained fewer articles for the years 2000-2020, in part because many recent papers have not yet been digitized or added to their collections.

Although this method yielded a workable sample in French, there was not enough to go on from the English-language press because of a lack of 20<sup>th</sup>-century English-language papers in BAnQ's digital collection. Most of the English-language results came from the *Sherbrooke Record* (now known as *The Record*), which is digitized for the period from 1901 to 2019. The major Montreal English-language newspapers (*Montreal Star*, *Montreal Gazette*) are not in the database. The digitization of Quebec City's English dailies does not go beyond 1924, and searches in these did not yield any results.

Given this limitation, I supplemented my sample with results from the ProQuest *Montreal Gazette* collection, which contains full-text searchable copies going back to 1857.

I also searched for “best treated minority” in the ProQuest Canadian Newsstream, U.S. Newsstream, International Newsstream, and historic *New York Times* databases to get a sense of its use in the English-language press outside Quebec. This yielded few hits for Canada, which were mostly duplicates of articles in the Quebec press. As for newspapers outside Canada, there were only four hits: two recent ones about Quebec and two from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century about Italians referring to the German-speaking minority in Italy as “the best treated minority anywhere.”<sup>4</sup> Given this, it seemed fair to restrict my sample to Quebec sources. This should not be taken to mean that the phrase is seldom used elsewhere, but only that it is seldom used *in the existing ProQuest digitized sample of the English-language press* outside Canada; sources suggest that it is a recurring motif in the Finnish-language press with regard to the Swedish minority in Finland, for instance.<sup>5</sup>

4 “Tension on the Brenner,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1959.

5 Hervé Guay, “De culture et d’industrie,” *Le Devoir*, August 10, 2000.

## Analytical Framework

Using this sample, I then proceeded to create a media content analysis framework. I read each article in the sample and entered the following data into a spreadsheet:

- Name of media source
- Date of publication
- Language of article
- Author of article
- Name of person making the “best-treated minority” claim
- Which group is identified as the “best-treated minority”
- How the “best-treated” argument is used
- Geographical scope of “best-treated” status (in the world, in North America, in Canada)
- Arguments for/against “best-treated” claim
- Short summary of article

This made it possible to analyze content from both a historical and discourse analysis standpoint, examining how the phrase’s use has shifted over time. More details on discourse analysis can be found in the relevant section following the historical overview below.

## Limitations

In addition to the OCR and search engine issues alluded to above, there are other limitations to this preliminary research. Many significant newspapers are not available online. For instance, it would have been interesting to include the *Journal de Montréal*. This widely circulated populist/nationalist tabloid frequently makes use of the “best-treated minority” phrase. However, it is not indexed online for any meaningful length of time. The same goes for *The Suburban*, a widely distributed weekly newspaper known for its outspoken editorials.

Another limitation is that this methodology does not capture quasi-synonymous word choices that may have been dominant in other periods or contexts. For instance, some white New Zealanders have historically referred to their relations with Maori as “the fairest race relations in the world,”<sup>6</sup> a term that would not come up when researching “best-treated minority.” To remedy this, alternative terms were entered into the search engine (e.g. “most favoured,” “most privileged,” “best-treated community,” “most spoiled minority,” etc.) and yielded a few results, but it is likely that these do not encompass all relevant search phrases.

Finally, there are many other sources worth exploring beyond periodicals: the archives of the National Assembly, the political platforms of different parties, or the writings of prominent political figures, to name just a few. These could be explored in greater detail to either validate, nuance, or perhaps contradict some of the preliminary conclusions laid out in this paper.

6 Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland, NZ: Penguin, 2003), 471.

# Historical Overview of the Phrase

## Consensus around the Position of Minorities (before 1960)

The idea that Quebec’s English speakers are the privileged descendants of a wealthy ruling and merchant class is an enduring myth with some basis in fact. Indeed, it is true that the British Conquest of 1759 led to a colonial regime that long favoured British Protestants. Even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, long after the establishment of responsible government, 70% of the wealth in Canada was controlled by a small group of mostly English-speaking Protestants living in Montreal’s Golden Square Mile.<sup>7</sup> This fed into a simplistic caricature of Quebec as consisting of a minority of “British rulers” amidst a majority of “French *porteurs d’eau*.”<sup>8</sup> These are the roots of the “best-treated minority” claim. This claim obscures the fact that most English speakers in Quebec were not part of the numerically small elite. In Montreal, there were far more English speakers living “below the hill.”<sup>9</sup>

The “best-treated minority” claim has been around for a long time. The earliest instance found was in 1886,<sup>10</sup> when the Montreal ultramontane<sup>11</sup> paper *La Vérité* stated that “dans aucun pays au monde on ne peut trouver une minorité mieux traitée par la majorité que l’est la minorité protestante<sup>12</sup> dans notre province.”<sup>13</sup>

The *La Vérité* example is just one of many articles prior to 1920 that define the “best-treated minority” along religious rather than linguistic lines (see Figure 1). This is not surprising, since it reflects the way communities in Quebec primarily defined and organized themselves.<sup>14</sup> The Catholic religion was a central pillar of French-Canadian identity, especially between the 1840s and the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, a distinct English-speaking Irish Catholic community with a strong identity and separate institutions persisted well into early

7 Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers* (Montreal: IQRC, 1985), 17-18.

8 Translation: “drawers of water,” an expression typically used to depict Francophones as a largely working class population holding menial jobs.

9 See Herbert Brown Ames, *The City Below The Hill: The Slums of Montreal, 1897* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

10 As mentioned above, there are probably earlier uses of the argument, but finding these would require more thorough research given the current low quality of OCR for 19<sup>th</sup>-century newspapers.

11 Ultramontanism is a doctrine that favoured the supremacy of papal over national or diocesan authority in the Roman Catholic Church. It criticized the separation of Church and State. This doctrine was popular in French Canada in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

12 The overwhelming majority of Protestants in Quebec were English speaking at this time.

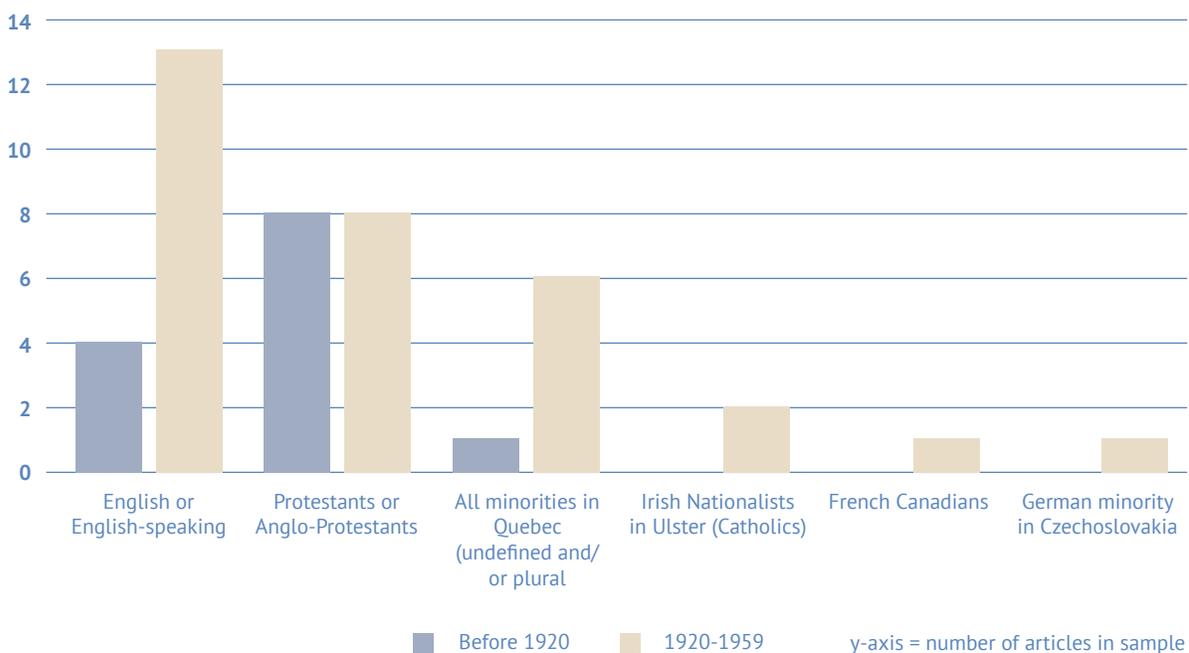
13 “Le ‘Mail,’ *La Vérité*, December 4, 1886. Translation: “In no country in the world can you find a minority better treated by the majority than the Protestant minority in our province.”

14 See Patrick Donovan, “The Boundaries of Charity: The Impact of Ethnic Relations on Private Charitable Services for Quebec City’s English-Speakers, 1759-1900” (PhD Thesis, Université Laval, 2019).

15 See René Hardy, *Contrôle social et mutation de la culture religieuse au Québec, 1830-1930* (Montreal: Boréal, 1999).

20<sup>th</sup>-century Quebec, even after “Irishness” had faded elsewhere in the country.<sup>16</sup> Many Francophones recognized the ethno-religious distinctions among English speakers—for instance, differences between Irish-origin Catholics and British-origin Protestants—while simplifying some of the underlying nuances, confounding all Protestants as a unified “anglo” or “anglais” group and considering all Irish to be Catholics despite a significant Irish-Protestant minority. “Nous sommes les uns Canadiens-français, les autres anglo-Canadiens, les autres irlando-Canadiens,” writes a journalist for *La Vérité* in 1900.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 1: Which minority is singled out as being “best-treated” in study sample prior to 1960?**



Religious and linguistic distinctions were at their most evident and contentious when it came to schools. In Quebec, in the pre-1960 period under review in this section, the school system was primarily divided along confessional lines but also, to a lesser extent, along linguistic lines.<sup>18</sup>

16 This is in contrast to Ontario and other provinces, where assimilation into mainstream English-speaking Canadian society occurred sooner. See Simon Jolivet, *Le vert et le bleu : Identité québécoise et identité irlandaise au tournant du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2011).

17 “La Confédération,” *La Vérité*, July 7, 1900.

18 Public education was deconfessionalized in 2000.

The Protestant minority controlled its school boards, schools, and curricula,<sup>19</sup> and English-speaking Catholics had some autonomy to do the same within Catholic school boards dominated by Francophones.<sup>20</sup> In the rest of Canada, access to public French-language Catholic education gradually decreased in the years after Confederation; growing restrictions in Manitoba and Ontario gathered the most attention. There was a greater push to assimilate French-speaking minorities, since this was seen as a means to Canadian unity. French speakers outside Quebec felt disempowered, and Francophone Quebecers were aware of this situation.<sup>21</sup> In short, there was some basis to the claim that English speakers in Quebec, particularly Protestants, were better treated than other minorities in Canada with regard to education.

Roughly half of the articles in my pre-1960 sample explicitly raised the “best-treated minority” argument in relation to the schools question. While there was some disagreement in Quebec between Francophones and English speakers with regards to the merits of a strictly confessional education system,<sup>22</sup> there was consensus across linguistic lines that English speakers had better access to education in their language than did Francophones in the rest of the country. In 1912, Montreal alderman John Boyd wrote: “It seems to me that the English-speaking minority in the Province of Quebec furnishes a striking exemplification of what the position of minorities in all the Provinces should be.”<sup>23</sup> Some English speakers in Quebec worried that attempts in the rest of Canada to assimilate Francophones into the English-speaking majority there would lead to a backlash against themselves.<sup>24</sup>

This consensus about English speakers, particularly Protestants, being privileged was mirrored in the political sphere. Every Quebec premier from 1920 to 1959 made use of some variation on the “best-treated minority” phrase in speeches. For example:

19 See Roderick MacLeod and Mary Anne Poutanen, *A Meeting of the People: School Boards and Protestant Communities in Quebec, 1801–1998* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

20 See Mélanie Lanouette, “Penser l'éducation, dire sa culture : Les écoles catholiques anglaises au Québec, 1928–1964” (Ph.D. Thesis, Université Laval, 2004).

21 See for example Michel Verrette, “Manitoba Schools Question,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/manitoba-schools-question>; Marilyn Barber and Paul-François Sylvestre, “Ontario Schools Question,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ontario-schools-question>.

22 English-speaking Quebecers F.G. Scott and Robert Sellar, among others, argued in favour of non-confessional schools, which was not a popular position among Francophone Catholics. See “Chronique du mois,” *L'enseignement primaire* 46, March 1901; “Une lettre de M. L'Abbé A.V. Huard,” *Le Soleil*, March 28, 1905.

23 The letter from John Boyd is published in both English and French: “La minorité anglaise de Québec n'a jamais eu à se plaindre,” *Le Devoir*, October 24, 1912.

24 Robert Talbot, “Moving Beyond Two Solitudes: Constructing a Dynamic and Unifying Francophone/Anglophone Relationship, 1916–1940” (PhD Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2014), 97–98, 134–135.

- Louis-Alexandre Taschereau (Liberal premier, 1920-1936): “Il n’y a pas de pays au monde où la minorité est mieux traitée que dans la province de Québec.”<sup>25</sup>
- Adélard Godbout (Liberal premier, 1936 & 1939-1944): “Dans quelle province la minorité tant au point de vue scolaire qu’à tous les autres, est-elle plus royalement traitée que dans la province de Québec?”<sup>26</sup>
- Maurice Duplessis (Union Nationale premier, 1936-1939 & 1944-1959): “Nulle part au monde les minorités ne sont mieux traitées que dans cette province. . . . Et je parle non seulement de la minorité protestante, mais de toutes les minorités.”<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, this phrase was a constant feature in Duplessis’ speeches, recurring, at different dates, in seven of the forty articles for this period.

There are also many examples of English-speaking politicians making similar statements about the positive treatment their own minority received. Gordon W. Scott, Liberal member of the Legislative Council under Taschereau (1932-1940), challenged the Anglophone crowd at a 1935 rally in Lennoxville by saying:

*I will resign my seat in the Legislative Council if anyone can show me any place where the minority has been treated with such a degree of fairness as we have been by the French-speaking people who outnumber us five to one.*<sup>28</sup>

When Duplessis boasted in 1952 about the superior treatment of all minorities in Quebec, the leader of the Liberal opposition at the time, George Marler, “s’empressa de répliquer qu’il partageait entièrement l’opinion de M. Duplessis à ce sujet et que, à titre de membre de la minorité protestante, il abondait absolument dans le même sens.”<sup>29</sup>

The only pre-1960 article in the sample that rejects the “best-treated minority” claim is from Téléphore-Damien Bouchard, a former Quebec Liberal opposition leader (1936-1939) and the first president of Hydro-Québec (1944). He stood out at the time for his anticlerical positions and was considered a radical leftist by his opponents.<sup>30</sup> In 1947, Bouchard wrote that:

25 “Si la province d’Ontario approuve l’union, Québec promet de faire de même,” *La Presse*, March 13, 1925. Translation: “There is no country in the world where the minority is treated better than in the province of Quebec.”

26 “Les Canadiens-français ne marchandent pas,” *La Presse*, December 4, 1940. Translation: “In what province is the minority more royally treated than in the province of Quebec, both from an educational standpoint and in all other respects?”

27 Camille L’Heureux, “Le traitement des minorités,” *Le Droit*, January 22, 1952. Translation: “Nowhere in the world are minorities treated better than in this province. . . . And I am speaking not only of the Protestant minority, but of all minorities.”

28 “Gordon Scott Praises Work of Government,” *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, November 22, 1935.

29 Camille L’Heureux, *op cit*. Translation: “[George Marler] was quick to reply that he fully shared Mr. Duplessis’ opinion on this matter and that, as a member of the Protestant minority, he was absolutely in agreement.”

30 See Jean-Noël Dion, “Un politicien maudit : T.-D. Bouchard.” *Cap-aux-Diamants* 30, Summer 1992.

*partisans of the ancient order of things never miss a chance to cry from every roof that our Province is the place where the minority is the best treated in the whole world. Because those who are in a minority do not waste their time complaining, it does not mean to say that such a statement is true.*

Bouchard argued that at least two minority groups present both in Quebec and the rest of Canada received better treatment in the other provinces with regard to education. These were the minority in favour of non-confessional schools and the Jewish minority, whose members in Quebec were obliged to attend Protestant schools where they were subjected to Christian religious education.<sup>31</sup>

Bouchard may have been the exception that proved the rule for the pre-1960 period. Overall, the media sample portrays a broad consensus across linguistic, religious, and political lines that Quebec was exemplary in its treatment of minorities. In hindsight, while many would argue that there was some truth to this regarding the white English-speaking Protestant minority, uncritically extending this to all minorities reveals blind spots in the political rhetoric and media discourse at the time.<sup>32</sup>

### The Best-Treated Separatists in the World? (1960-1963)

The early 1960s represent an anomaly in my sample: 73% of the articles for this decade refer to French Canadians as the “best-treated minority.” In every other decade studied, this term is used primarily in relation to English-speaking communities in Quebec. Even more remarkably, the term was used by French-Canadian leaders of the burgeoning Quebec independence movement to refer to their own position in Canada, which struck many others as self-defeating.

Before the Parti Québécois (PQ) burst onto the scene in 1968, there was the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (RIN). Founded in 1960, this citizen's movement became a political party in 1963.<sup>33</sup> Marcel Chaput, who wrote *Pourquoi je suis séparatiste* in 1961, was a key player in its early days. Chaput repeatedly used the following line: “Il est vrai que les canadiens français forment la minorité la mieux traitée au monde. Mais là n'est pas la question.”<sup>34</sup> His punchline was that French Canadians did not want to be a minority; they wanted to be the majority, and the only way to achieve this was through the independence of Quebec. This argument was also used by others

31 T. Damien Bouchard, “They will have to come,” *Le Clairon*, April 25, 1947; also published in French as T. Damien Bouchard, “Le régime de l'intolérance,” *Le Clairon*, May 9, 1947.

32 The blind spots are too numerous to dwell on here, but include discrimination toward religious minorities (Roncarelli affair), Black and Indigenous peoples, and the internment of innocent Italians during WWII. See, for example: Stephen A. Scott, “Roncarelli v Duplessis,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/roncarelli-v-duplessis>; Dorothy W. Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2006); Tabitha Marshall and David Gallant, “Residential Schools in Canada,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools>; Joyce Pilarella, *Remembering the Internment: Italian Canadians during World War II*, Montreal (Montreal: CIBPA, 2012).

33 Clinton Archibald and Maude-Emmanuelle Lambert, “Parti Québécois,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/parti-quebecois>.

34 “La confédération empoisonne la nation canadienne-française,” *L'Action catholique*, June 1, 1961. See also “Chaput : Le Québec est la dernière colonie où le français soit folklorique,” *Le Devoir*, January 23, 1962. Translation: “It is true that French Canadians are the best-treated minority in the world. But that's not the point here.”

in the movement, such as Pierre Gravel, who sought to “internationalize the movement” by co-founding the Comité international pour l’indépendance du Québec in Paris.<sup>35</sup>

This line of argumentation struck some RIN supporters as self-defeating. A letter writer from Rimouski wrote the following in 1962:

*Chaput, à vrai dire, c'est l'homme qui pue l'Anglo-Canadien. . . . Pourquoi diable réclamons-nous l'indépendance si nous sommes si bien traités? Moi, je connais une minorité bien traitée au Québec : la minorité anglo-canadienne. . . . Que M. Chaput se réveille! Il nous faut des arguments moins 'niaiseux' et plus vigoureux.*<sup>36</sup>

Chaput was eventually replaced in the RIN by the more progressive and charismatic Pierre Bourgault.<sup>37</sup>

Chaput’s line was used by at least one federalist to discredit the independence movement. Future Prime Minister Brian Mulroney cited Chaput in 1969 to argue that seeking independence while also claiming to receive exemplary treatment was, to use Albert Schweitzer’s adage, “patriotism deprived of its nobility.”<sup>38</sup>

This line of argument faded, but it resurfaced in a modified form by disappointed nationalist observers of the political arena. These intellectuals and counterculture figures argued that the majority of Quebec Francophones were too pampered, comfortable, and well treated to support the courageous gesture of independence.<sup>39</sup> In so doing, they confirmed Chaput’s point. Political scientist Gérard Bergeron, for instance, wrote in 1977 that he thought many Quebecers were stuck in a prolonged adolescence: “L’indépendance est un acte de maturation et un grand défi,” but Quebecers were not ready because “[nous] avons peut-être été la minorité ethnique la mieux, ou la moins mal, traitée de l’histoire des temps modernes.”<sup>40</sup>

35 Alan Harvey, “Word Issues from Montmartre District,” *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, December 11, 1963.

36 “Le disque Chaput est usé!,” *Le Progrès du Golfe*, June 1, 1962. Translation: “Chaput, in fact, is the man who reeks of Anglo-Canadianness. . . . Why on earth are we calling for independence if we are treated so well? I know of a minority that is well treated in Quebec: the Anglo-Canadian minority. . . . It is time for Mr. Chaput to wake up! We need fewer ‘silly’ arguments and more vigorous ones.”

37 *Le RIN*, documentary film directed by Jean-Claude Labrecque (Les Productions Virage, 2002). Brian Mulroney, “One Man’s View, How Quebec’s Present and Future Look, and the Issue of Involvement,” *The Gazette*, July 6, 1969.

38 Brian Mulroney, “One Man’s View, How Quebec’s Present and Future Look, and the Issue of Involvement,” *The Gazette*, July 6, 1969.

39 See, for instance, *Le confort et l’indifférence*, documentary film directed by Denys Arcand (ONF/NFB, 1981), [https://www.onf.ca/film/confort\\_et\\_lindifference/](https://www.onf.ca/film/confort_et_lindifference/).

40 Gérard Bergeron, “L’indépendance : oui, mais... Le changement n’est pas encore enclenché,” *La Presse*, February 21, 1977. Translation: “Independence is an act of maturation and a great challenge,” but Quebecers were not ready because “[we] were perhaps the best, or least badly, treated ethnic minority in modern history.”

## Redefining English-Speaking Quebec (1963-1980)

As noted above, in the years prior to 1960, English speakers in Quebec were more likely to embrace than dispute claims of favourable treatment. This continued for the subsequent twenty years, but newspaper articles suggest a growing discomfort within English-speaking Quebec as power dynamics shifted in the province. This period, known as the Quiet Revolution, involved secularization and the growth of a strong Francophone-run welfare state.<sup>41</sup>

The 1965 brief from the *Montreal Star* to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism is indicative of critical self-examination taking place within the English-speaking community. The brief stated that English speakers, who had long identified with the Canadian majority, increasingly felt like a minority in the face of growing French-Canadian influence in Quebec. The brief's authors said that although these changes were necessary, they worried that Quebec nationalists eyed English speakers with suspicion and hostility. The brief acknowledged that English speakers in Quebec had long been the best-treated minority in Canada, and that they had felt entitled to this position, but that this sense of entitlement could be accompanied by arrogance or disregard toward the Francophone majority.<sup>42</sup> In short, it is an ambivalent text that straddles the line between issuing a mea culpa and self-victimization: “best treated,” but for how much longer?

Privileges and rights around access to education were brought into question during this period. Declining birth rates among Francophones led to a growing desire to integrate more immigrants into the French-language school sector; this would ensure that these immigrants became Francophones, thus maintaining Quebec's Francophone majority. When the president of the Quebec Association of Protestant School Boards appeared before a parliamentary commission on education in 1971, he was told that English speakers needed to learn to live like a minority. Parti Québécois (PQ) MNA Claude Charron stated that English speakers were the best-treated minority in the world, but that the Francophone majority had made a mistake in allowing Protestants to create their own education system: “Il faudra vous habituer à l'avenir à ne pas prendre des privileges comme des droits.”<sup>43</sup>

41 See René Durocher, “Quiet Revolution,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/quiet-revolution>; For specific measures, see also François Vaillancourt, “Les aspects économiques des politiques linguistiques en vigueur au Québec, Répercussions sur les anglophones et francophones sur le marché du travail, 1970-2015,” in *La Charte : La loi 101 et les Québécois d'expression anglaise / The Charter: Bill 101 and English-Speaking Quebec*, eds. Lorraine O'Donnell, Patrick Donovan, and Brian Lewis (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2021), 226-227.

42 Françoise Côté, “Les Anglophones du Québec, ‘étrangers dans un patelin qu'ils aiment’ – Star,” *La Presse*, March 16, 1965; “The Montreal Star : il n'y a pas lieu de rebâtir la constitution,” *Le Devoir*, March 17, 1965; “Le Montreal Star s'oppose aux Québécois qui veulent rebâtir la constitution,” *L'Action : quotidien catholique*, March 17, 1965.

43 Damien Gagnon, “Un avertissement de l'UN et du PQ aux anglophones, Vous devrez apprendre à vivre comme une minorité au Québec,” *Le Soleil du Saguenay*, October 1, 1971. Translation: “In the future, you will have to get used to not assuming that privileges are rights.”

Quebec introduced robust language laws between 1974 and 1977. Bill 22 in 1974 recognized French as the only official language in Quebec and limited access to English-language schools. Then, the sovereignist PQ government came to power in 1976 and the following year adopted Bill 101, which further limited access to English-language schools.<sup>44</sup> English-speaking Quebecers reacted to this changing situation by either adapting, mobilizing opposition, or leaving the province; nearly 200,000 English speakers left Quebec between 1971 and 1986 in what some have qualified as an exodus.<sup>45</sup>

Despite this growing unease and opposition, the English-language press did not reject the “best-treated minority” argument, which appears, albeit quite rarely, during this period. Even Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau himself said that English speakers in Quebec were the most privileged minority in Canada.<sup>46</sup> There is hardly any opposition by English speakers in my sample before the year 1980.<sup>47</sup> The little opposition that does exist is more about English speakers disputing the “minority” part than any “best treated” claim.<sup>48</sup> For the most part, English-speaking Quebecers continue to reinforce the claim. Provincial Liberal finance minister William Tetley heaped praise on Quebec for being the only province to have respected constitutional guarantees to minorities.<sup>49</sup> At a United Church meeting in Saskatoon, Rev. A. Lovelace of Lennoxville said he “was impressed with how interested the rest of Canada is in Quebec, but they are also misinformed. They think the English are a persecuted minority, and I don’t think there is any minority anywhere so well treated.”<sup>50</sup> Jan Morgan, coordinator of external affairs for McGill University, also said English-speaking Quebecers were the “world’s best-treated minority” at a 1972 symposium.<sup>51</sup> Union leader Robert Dean said the same in 1980.<sup>52</sup> Quebec’s English-language press remained neutral toward these claims and did not seek to debunk them. This neutrality disappeared in the 1980s.

44 Anne-Marie Busque, “Quebec Language Policy,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/quebec-language-policy>.

45 John Dickinson and Brian Young, *A Short History of Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 311.

46 Charles Lynch, “English Quebecers look after themselves,” *The Gazette*, October 9, 1974.

47 There is some evidence of challenges having been made to the “best-treated minority” claim outside the press, such as in F.R. Scott’s private journal of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in the 1960s. See: Graham Fraser, ed, *The Fate of Canada: F. R. Scott’s Journal of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1963–1971* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021), 90.

48 Gerald LeBlanc, “‘Nous ne sommes pas une minorité mais des Québécois’ (un leader anglophone),” *Le Devoir*, October 1, 1970.

49 LeBlanc, “‘Nous ne sommes pas une minorité mais des Québécois,’” *op. cit.*

50 Francis Westley, “Opinion Varies Widely Among Clerics on Conference,” *Sherbrooke Record*, August 31, 1972.

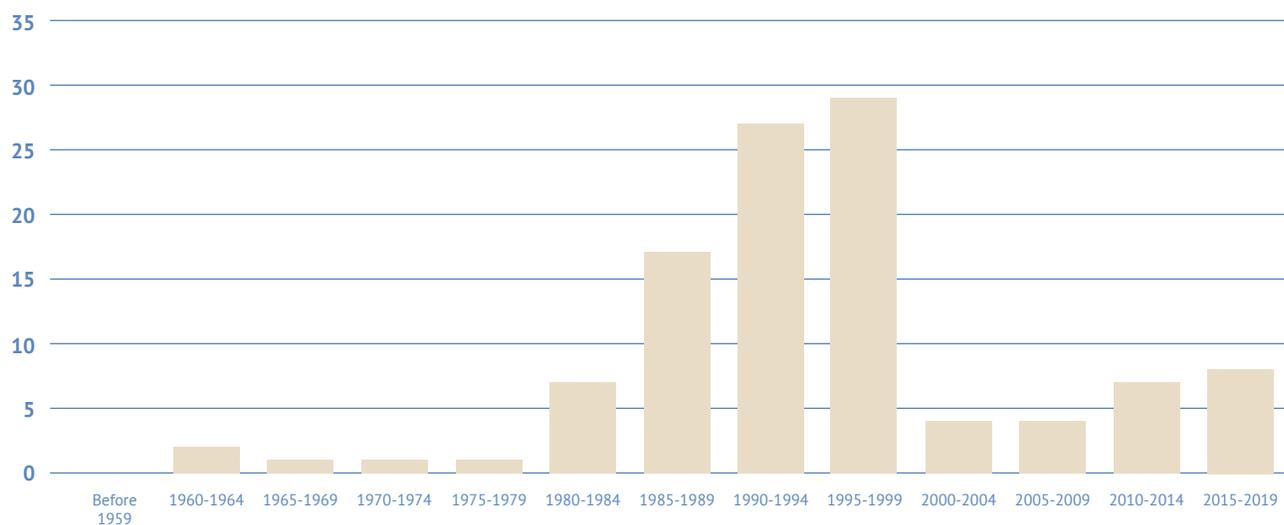
51 Paul Waters, “Anglos Get Top Treatment, Seminar Told,” *The Gazette*, November 23, 1972.

52 “Le ‘vrai Québec’ de Robert Dean,” *Le Soleil*, March 29, 1980.

## Backlash against the Best-Treated Minority Argument (1980-Present)

While the “best-treated minority” phrase had long been primarily used in the French-language press, the frequency of its use in the sampled English-language press of Quebec increased dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s (see Figure 2). Prior to 1980, the phrase had typically appeared in the English-language press as a third-party quote in a news report. After this date, it was more likely to be criticized or used satirically in editorials, columns, opinion pieces, or letters to the editor.

**Figure 2: Appearance of the phrase “best-treated minority” in the *Montreal Gazette*, 1857-2019**



y-axis = number of articles in sample

Source: ProQuest databases for *The Gazette* (1867-2010), *The Gazette* (2011-2014), and *Montreal Gazette* (2014-recent)

In the press, English speakers showed a growing sense of exasperation toward the phrase. A 1980 column refers to Quebec Premier René Levesque’s use of it as part of an “old refrain,”<sup>53</sup> the first sign of mild annoyance in my sample of articles. That annoyance grew. By 1988, *Gazette* columnist Don MacPherson considered it a form of “finger-wagging condescension,”<sup>54</sup> and made frequent satirical use of the term, often to decry big government (e.g. “most taxed minority in the world”).<sup>55</sup> Gaspesian community leader Howard Davidson considered its repeated use patronizing, adding that it made him think of “sewage that must be ‘treated’ in order to remove the dangerous impurities.”<sup>56</sup>

53 “Premier Lauds False Equality,” *The Gazette*, November 13, 1981.

54 Don MacPherson, “Extremism won’t end language debate,” *The Gazette*, May 7, 1988.

55 For example, he refers to April 30 as “the day we are reminded that the ‘best-treated minority in Canada/North America/the world/the universe’ pays its share.” Don MacPherson, “The Minority Pays for the Majority – It’s the Quebec Way,” *The Gazette*, May 1, 2012.

56 Howard Davidson, “Myths: What a Sad Day for Canada,” *The Record*, April 24, 1990.

In short, many annoyed with this “worn cliché”<sup>57</sup> may have agreed with Rita Legault, who wrote in 1989: “If I hear that inane comment once more I will scream.”<sup>58</sup>

Why had this phrase, which had been used and embraced by English speakers themselves in the recent past, suddenly become so unbearable?

For one, it was becoming more difficult to make the case that English speakers were better treated than Francophones outside Quebec. For a long time, that argument had rested on better access by English speakers to minority language elementary and secondary schools. However, the balance slowly shifted toward better access for Francophones outside Quebec. Starting in the 1970s, Quebec restricted eligibility to attend English-language schools through a series of laws designed to protect the French language, as discussed above. Conversely, section 23 of the 1982 *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* paved the way for the creation of more French-language schools and school boards in other provinces.<sup>59</sup> The student population in Quebec’s English-language sector declined by 61% from the early 1970s to 2020, whereas the number of French schools outside Quebec grew.<sup>60</sup> As early as 1983, Liberal MNA Reed Scowen said:

*The Quebec government will now have to be very careful when they say the English-speaking minority in Quebec is the best-treated minority in Canada. When you consider the rights and limitations of the minority communities in [Quebec and Ontario], that can’t really be proved either way.*<sup>61</sup>

French-language schools outside Quebec have developed considerably since Scowen’s statement. In 2016, there were roughly twice as many Francophones per capita enrolled in French-language schools outside Quebec as there were English speakers in Quebec enrolled in English schools.<sup>62</sup> This excludes enrolment in French immersion schools for non-Francophones outside Quebec, which has also increased. Moreover, a 2012 study argued that other provinces spend five times as much as Quebec per capita on education, and ten times as much for the official language minority education sector.<sup>63</sup> In short, as Alliance

57 Peggy Curran, “Another Futile Tour for Premier: He’s polishing his image with folks who don’t care,” *The Gazette*, May 14, 1998.

58 Rita Legault, “His Type We Can Do Without,” *The Record*, February 23, 1989.

59 Serge Dupuis, “Section 23 and Francophone Education outside of Quebec,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/article-23>.

60 Nadine Ciamarra and Patricia Lamarre, with Patrick Donovan and Lorraine O’Donnell, “Decline of Enrolment in Quebec’s English-Language School Sector,” Concordia University (Montreal): QUESCREEN Education Research Brief no. 1, 2021, [https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescreen/docs/Brief\\_1.pdf](https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescreen/docs/Brief_1.pdf).

61 Stephanie Whittaker, “Ontario’s French Schooling Law Draws Reserved Praise,” *The Gazette*, March 25, 1983.

62 A total of 83,709 students attended official language minority (OLM) schools in Quebec, whereas 163,509 attended OLM schools outside Quebec. The English OLM community is roughly the same size as the French OLM community outside Quebec (1,103,480 vs. 1,024,195). Source of statistics: Statistics Canada, “Census in brief: English, French and Official Language Minorities in Canada,” Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016011, 2017; Statistics Canada, “Number of students in official languages programs, public elementary and secondary schools, by program type, grade and sex,” Table 37-10-0009-01.

63 François Vaillancourt, Olivier Coche, Marc Antoine Cadieux, and Jamie Lee Ronson, *Official Language Policies of the Canadian Provinces: Costs and Benefits in 2006* (Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2012) quoted in Don MacPherson, “The ‘Best-treated Minority’? Think Again,” *The Gazette*, January 12, 2012.

Quebec chairman Peter Blaikie said in 1989, the situation of Francophones outside Quebec was improving “slowly and in a rather limping fashion,” while the opposite was happening for English speakers in Quebec.<sup>64</sup>

There have also been changes in the relative socioeconomic conditions of French and English speakers in Quebec. In the early 1960s, the average wage of Francophones was two thirds that of English speakers in the province.<sup>65</sup> Since the early 2000s, the median income of English-speaking Quebecers has been lower than that of Francophones, unemployment rates have been higher, and the percentage of the population under the low-income cutoff rate has been higher.<sup>66</sup> Pointing to these facts in 2014, law student Colin Standish wrote: “That anglophones are a privileged elite and ‘the best-treated minority in the world’ are toxic myths that jaundice language debates.”<sup>67</sup>

Those arguing that English speakers are the “best-treated minority” were less likely to point to socioeconomic indicators and more likely to point to the strength of the community’s institutions. While the English-language elementary and secondary education sectors have declined, the post-secondary sector remains robust, as do health and social service institutions serving English speakers, particularly in urban areas. The idea of disproportionate public funding going to these institutions is a recurring argument, with the minority occasionally referred to as being “spoiled.”<sup>68</sup> “[Ils] ont plus d’universités au prorata que les francophones,” said PQ MNA Yves Blais in 1988,<sup>69</sup> an argument that is also applied with regards to hospitals.<sup>70</sup> The two most frequent counterarguments to these claims are that 1) English-speaking community institutions were developed with private money and that 2) they “serve Quebecers of all languages, and, like all Quebec institutions, their [public] funding is based on the numbers they serve.”<sup>71</sup>

Adherents of the “best-treated minority” argument also regularly bring up another point: the relative position of the French and English languages in North America. Gilles Rhéaume, president of the nationalistic Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal in the 1980s, said the rampant assimilation of Francophones taking place elsewhere in Canada spoke for itself when compared with the stability and linguistic retention of “l’une des minorités au monde parmi les mieux traitées.”<sup>72</sup> Some article writers in my sample make no

64 “Trudeau vision of bilingualism fading: Blaikie,” *The Gazette*, April 17, 1989.

65 Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers* (Montreal: IQRC, 1985), 212.

66 Marie-Hélène Lussier, “The Socioeconomic Status of Anglophones in Quebec” (Quebec: Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2012), 27; Joanne Pocock, “Demographic Profile of the English-Speaking Communities, Administrative Region of Montreal & the Rest of Quebec” (Quebec: CHSSN, 2018).

67 Colin Standish, “Enough with the Myths about Anglos,” *The Gazette*, May 5, 2014.

68 Sarah Scott, “Anglos Spoiled? That’s an Insult, Alliance Quebec President Snaps,” *The Gazette*, April 27, 1991.

69 Jean-François Bojanowski, “Blais appelle à la résistance nationale,” *La Revue*, December 27, 1988. See also Paul Rose speech quoted in John Tollefsrud, “Language Fight a Matter of Survival Say Ex-FLQ Terrorists and Bill 101 Vandal,” *The Record*, February 15, 1989.

70 Kathryn Greenaway, “Daybreak Debate,” *The Gazette*, March 12, 2014.

71 Don MacPherson, “It was a Victory for PQ Language Hawks, not for Lisée,” *The Gazette*, September 16, 2017.

72 Gilles Rhéaume, “Au dela des préjugés, les chiffres,” *Le Soleil*, October 10, 1984.

distinction between a bilingual English-speaking minority in Quebec that is engaged in Francophone culture, and the mostly unilingual English-speaking majority outside the province: “le français [au Québec] subit la pression d’une Amérique du Nord anglo-saxonne dont le poids démographique est cinquante fois plus grand et . . . la communauté anglaise d’ici, qui est un morceau de cette majorité, est la ‘minorité’ la plus gâtée au monde.”<sup>73</sup>

The growing irritation expressed by English speakers at the “best-treated minority” argument did not initially stop Quebec premiers and politicians from using the phrase, particularly those of a nationalist bent. English-speaking Quebecers were referred to as the “best-treated minority” by premiers René Levesque (1976-1985),<sup>74</sup> Robert Bourassa (1985-1994),<sup>75</sup> Lucien Bouchard (1996-2001),<sup>76</sup> and most of all by Bernard Landry (2001-2003).<sup>77</sup> No reference was found in the sample to Jacques Parizeau (1994-1996) using it, and there was a twenty-year lull in its use by Quebec premiers after Landry. However, since 2000 it has continued to be used by other prominent sovereignist politicians like Jean-François Lisée,<sup>78</sup> Yves-François Blanchet,<sup>79</sup> and Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois.<sup>80</sup> Recently, Premier François Legault (2018-) said that “no minority in Canada is better served than English-speaking Quebecers.”<sup>81</sup>

This increasing use of the phrase by French-language hawks and sovereignists was noted in the press. Human rights lawyer Julius Grey had already attributed the phrase’s use to “Quebec nationalists” in 1989.<sup>82</sup> By the mid-1990s, it is described as a “nationalist adage”<sup>83</sup> and a phrase “used by Quebec nationalist hardliners.”<sup>84</sup> By 2005, Grey considered it an “idée fixe” of “les chevaliers de la langue française”<sup>85</sup> and, by 2017, Dan Delmar attributed it mostly to “old school nationalists.”<sup>86</sup>

73 Michel Bédard, “Affichage public et publicité commerciale,” *La Presse*, February 11, 1987.

74 René Levesque, “Never Will We Accept This Stab in the Back,” *The Gazette*, November 14, 1981.

75 Don MacPherson, “Extremism won’t end language debate,” *op. cit.*; Sarah Scott, “Anglo health-care plan in limbo,” *The Gazette*, February 13, 1989; Débats de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec, 33<sup>e</sup> législature, 2<sup>e</sup> session, December 16, 1988.

76 Lucien Bouchard said this in his role as leader of the federal Bloc Québécois, prior to becoming premier of Quebec. Daniel Sanger and Jack Branswell, “Wanderlust luring anglos out of Quebec, Ryan says,” *The Gazette*, May 2, 1991.

77 “Langue : Landry invite les militants à la patience,” *La Presse*, March 14, 2000; Elizabeth Thomson and Kevin Dougherty, “Landry vs. Adam in Merger Duel: Commissioner dislikes definition of anglo,” *The Gazette*, May 17, 2001.

78 Kathryn Greenaway, “Daybreak debate leads to language faceoff; Parti Québécois minister Lisée, Liberal MNA Kelley chat on-air from the Beaconsfield train station,” *The Gazette*, March 12, 2014.

79 “Live coverage: Federal leaders face off in French language debate,” *The Gazette*, October 3, 2019 (transcript of live feed).

80 Dan Delmar, “Even Friendly Nationalism Excludes,” *The Gazette*, June 21, 2017.

81 Philip Authier, “Quebec anglos are best-served minority in Canada, Legault insists,” *The Gazette*, October 20, 2021.

82 Julius Grey, “Anglos as the best-treated minority doesn’t add up,” *The Gazette*, October 3, 1989.

83 Quotes, *The Gazette*, October 17, 1995.

84 Susan C. Mastine, “Allow Townshipers to Continue to Be Example to Others,” *The Record*, September 27, 1996.

85 Julius Grey, “Vache sacrée ou mouton noir?,” *La Presse*, August 19, 2005. Translation: “knights of the French language.”

86 Dan Delmar, *op. cit.*

How did the phrase go from widespread use that bridged political and linguistic divides to narrower use by Quebec nationalists? A split of sorts gradually revealed itself in 1990, when the “best-treated minority” phrase was proposed within a formal motion in the Quebec National Assembly. PQ MNA Jacques Brassard brought forth a three-part motion to denounce anti-French sentiment in Canada, stand up for the notwithstanding clause, and “reiterate [the National Assembly’s] conviction that the anglophone minority in Quebec is by far the best-treated minority in Canada.”<sup>87</sup> In his defence of the motion, he said: “il faut le répéter et on ne le répétera jamais assez, la communauté anglophone du Québec est la minorité la mieux traitée au monde; c’est la minorité la mieux traitée au monde!”<sup>88</sup> He repeated it five times in total. The motion was debated and revised over the following week. In the end, the ruling Liberals softened its language in an attempt to reach a compromise. Rather than claiming that the minority was the best treated, the Liberals proposed that the Assembly reiterate “its commitment to act in such a way that its English-speaking community, which can be considered the best-treated minority, continues to be treated with justice and equity.”<sup>89</sup> The revised motion was adopted with 77 in favour (Liberals), 24 against (PQ), and 2 abstentions from the Equality Party;<sup>90</sup> Equality MNA Neil Cameron said he supported the condemnation of anti-Francophone sentiment, but felt “the proposed amendment wound up as a kind of dog’s breakfast.”<sup>91</sup>

A list of the main arguments used for and against the “best-treated minority” claim, and the frequency of their use in my sample, can be found in Appendix A.

## Other Best-Treated Minorities

While most articles in my sample refer to minorities in Canada, a little over five percent list other potential contenders for the “best-treated minority” title. Some examples are firmly rooted in the past (Germans in Czechoslovakia in 1938;<sup>92</sup> Whites in 1970s Rhodesia).<sup>93</sup> Others are still relevant today

87 Elisabeth Kalbfuss, “Sign law still necessary, Bourassa says,” *The Gazette*, March 15, 1990. The motion was initially phrased as follows: “Que cette Assemblée dénonce le sentiment antifrancophone qui prévaut au Canada anglais, suite à l’utilisation par le Québec de la clause ‘nonobstant’, qu’elle réitère sa conviction que la minorité anglophone du Québec est de loin la mieux traitée des minorités canadiennes, qu’elle réaffirme que cette clause ‘nonobstant’ constitue le dernier rempart assurant la survie de la nation québécoise et qu’elle n’entend abdiquer aucun de ses pouvoirs par rapport à son utilisation, plus particulièrement dans le domaine de la langue.” Débats de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec, 34<sup>e</sup> législature, 1<sup>ère</sup> session, March 14, 1990.

88 *Ibid.*

89 Italics and translation mine. The amended motion read as follows: “Que cette Assemblée regrette vivement le sentiment antifrancophone qui se manifeste dans certains milieux au Canada suite, notamment, à l’utilisation par le Québec de la clause ‘nonobstant’; réitère son engagement à agir de telle manière que sa communauté anglophone, qui peut être considérée comme la minorité la mieux traitée, continue de l’être avec justice et équité; réaffirme que la clause ‘nonobstant’ constitue un instrument légitime, voire essentiel pour le Québec, et entend conserver son droit de l’utiliser dans les situations requérant une telle intervention dans l’intérêt supérieur du Québec, plus particulièrement au chapitre de sa sécurité culturelle.” Débats de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec, 34<sup>e</sup> législature, 1<sup>ère</sup> session, March 22, 1990.

90 Débats de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec, 34<sup>e</sup> législature, 1<sup>ère</sup> session, *op. cit.*

91 Philip Authier, “Controversial clause backed; Liberals, PQ support notwithstanding motion,” *The Gazette*, March 23, 1990.

92 “La Tchécoslovaquie a décidé de résister,” *L’Illustration nouvelle*, September 24, 1938.

93 Gerald LeBlanc, “Nous ne sommes pas une minorité mais des Québécois” (un leader anglophone), *Le Devoir*, October 1, 1970.

(French minorities in Switzerland and Belgium;<sup>94</sup> Swedish minority in Finland).<sup>95</sup> Some claims were questionable even at the time they were made, such as the 1971 Soviet claims that Jews were the best-treated minority in the Soviet Union;<sup>96</sup> or the claim by Northern Ireland's Prime Minister James Craig in 1925 that no minority in the world "was treated with greater justice and consideration" than Irish nationalists ("Catholics") in Northern Ireland.<sup>97</sup> Last but not least, a 1995 letter to the editor in *The Gazette* argued that everyone knows that "the best treated minority in the world are the men."<sup>98</sup>

While a few of these claims warrant further comparative analysis, doing so falls outside the scope of this summary working paper. Moreover, as the next section will argue, the concept itself of the "best-treated minority in the world" should be reframed and rephrased before it is applied to any real-world comparative study.

## Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is "a field of research composed of multiple heterogeneous, largely qualitative, approaches to the study of relationships between language-in-use and the social world."<sup>99</sup> It is often used to assess and expose power relations. It is a useful approach when analyzing minority-majority relations, where power negotiations are constantly taking place, as is the case with linguistic relations in Quebec and Canada.

The "best-treated minority" claim, seen through a discourse analysis lens, is never neutral. It is a loaded rhetorical device intended to achieve political ends. At its best, it is used to convey a positive message about the majority being fair-minded, either by the majority itself or by the minority in question. At its worst, it is used by the majority to shut down minority grievances by depicting the minority as spoiled and privileged. In either case, the phrase seeks to prop up one group and/or disempower another through a mix of hyperbole, denial of agency, whataboutism and—at times—outright silencing and intimidation. Let us look at this more closely.

### Hyperbole

Hyperbole, also called exaggeration or overstatement, has many uses in discourse. It can be an inoffensive device in everyday speech (e.g. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse"), or a form of figurative language that is clearly not intended to be taken literally (e.g. "I have a million things to do"). It can also be

94 Jacques Tremblay, "Une réponse à ce bon M. Smith," *L'Action catholique*, May 2, 1962; Michael Brooker, "Enough on 'Best-Treated Minority' Myth," *The Gazette*, December 11, 1994.

95 Hervé Guay, "De culture et d'industrie," *Le Devoir*, August 10, 2000.

96 "Les Juifs : La minorité la mieux traitée en Union Soviétique," *Le Nouvelliste*, October 21, 1971.

97 "States a New Era Dawning for Irishmen," *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, December 11, 1925.

98 Ernie Hughson, "Best Treated Minority' Might Come as a Surprise," *The Gazette*, March 24, 1995.

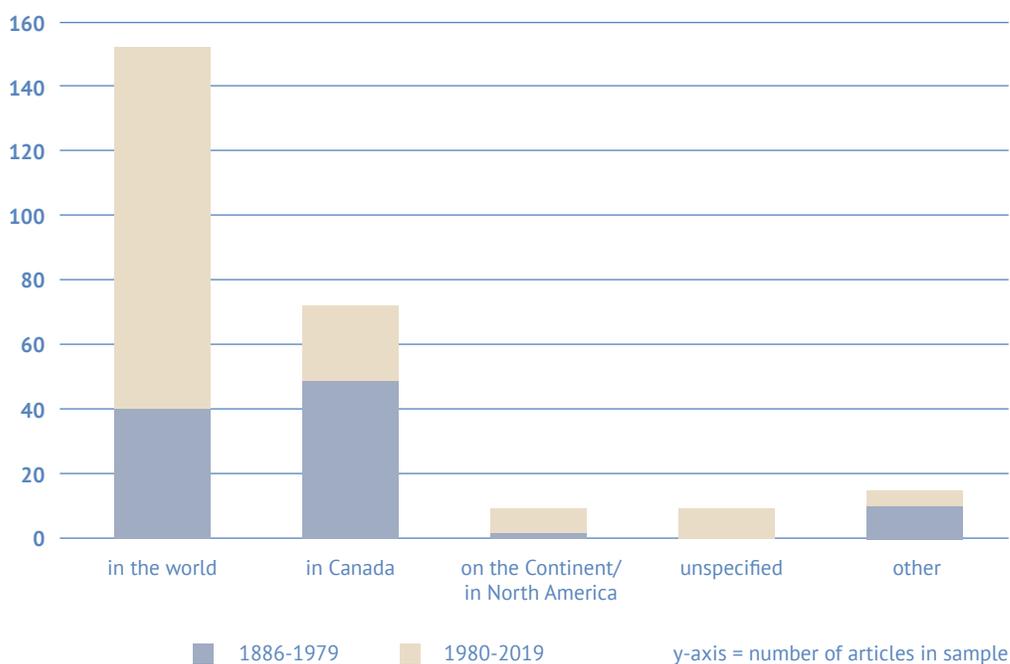
99 Melissa N.P. Johnson and Ethan McLean, "Discourse Analysis" in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2020).

weaponized in the hands of agile politicians, often populist politicians, who set up simplistic dichotomies devoid of nuance to whip up the passions of their targeted audience.

The “best-treated minority” trope is a form of hyperbole that has been used in populist discourse. While one could point to certain societal indicators as examples of the favourable position of Quebec’s English speakers, particularly in the past, the word “best” removes all possibility of nuance by positioning this power dynamic above all others.

The difficulty of supporting a claim of this nature with evidence increases in direct relation to the size of the comparative number of minorities referred to: “best-treated minority in the world” is harder to justify than “best-treated minority in Quebec.” In other words, the larger the territory, the more hyperbolic the claim. Most of the articles in my sample speak in global terms, referring to the “best-treated minority in the world” (see Figure 3). There is also a tendency toward “hyperbolic inflation” over time, with more use of “in the world” in the post-1980 period than before.

**Figure 3: Geographical scope of “best-treated” status in sample of articles**



The articles surveyed do not back up this “best-treated minority” claim through any comparative analysis.<sup>100</sup> In any case, an objective ranking of this nature would be difficult to undertake, since different metrics need to be taken into account (socioeconomic condition, access to education, health services, justice, etc.), and there is no consensus on the relative weight for each of these metrics. Moreover, external factors that are unrelated to a minority’s treatment by the majority can skew the different metrics (relative demographic weight; global use of language; historic circumstances of privilege, etc.). There are thousands of minorities in the world, thousands of indicators to measure their relative condition, and no universally agreed-upon index. The indexes that do exist, such as the “Peoples under threat” index,<sup>101</sup> are generally geared toward measuring the “worst treated” rather than the “best treated.”

## Denial of Agency

“Best-treated,” unlike synonymous terms like “privileged” or “well-off,” has a passive construction that implies a lack of agency on the part of the minority being “treated.” The term constructs the situation of the minority as resting solely or primarily on its treatment by the majority. It suggests that actions by the minority itself are not a factor in determining its socioeconomic condition; rather, the condition of the minority is due to decisions made through governance by the ruling majority. Martin Masse goes so far as to say that the choice of words seemingly strips English speakers of their citizenship:

*Dans l’expression même de ‘traiter’ des gens de telle ou telle façon, il y a implicitement l’idée que ces gens ne sont pas des citoyens de plein droit, que l’on se garde le pouvoir de les traiter un peu mieux ou un peu moins bien, comme du bétail ou des enfants, selon qu’ils se comportent ou non comme on le souhaite.*<sup>102</sup>

This idea was echoed by Elizabeth C. Speyer in *The Gazette*: “[A] minority is not there to be ‘treated’ in any fashion, whether ‘best-treated’ or worst-treated. A minority either has rights in law or it is in the category of second class citizen—that is, non-citizen.”<sup>103</sup>

100 One letter in our sample of articles refers to Jacques Leclerc’s encyclopedic global study *Langue et société* as proof that English speakers are one of the ten best-treated minorities in the world. No reference was found to any such global hierarchy of minorities in Leclerc’s volume, though Leclerc’s analysis includes several hyperbolic statements about English speakers in Quebec that would benefit from greater nuance (e.g. “Jamais ils ne se sont montrés solidaires des minorités francophones. . . . En somme, on peut dire que les Anglo-Québécois ne semblent pas avoir développé une grande autocritique,” in Jacques Leclerc, “Les droits linguistiques de la minorité anglophone,” *L’aménagement linguistique dans le monde* (Quebec: CEFAN, 2020), [https://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/amnord/Quebec-7Anglos-droits\\_lng.htm](https://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/amnord/Quebec-7Anglos-droits_lng.htm) Translation: They have never shown solidarity with the French-speaking minorities. . . . In short, we can say that Anglo-Quebecers do not seem to have developed a great level of self-criticism.

101 Minority Rights Group International, *Peoples Under Threat*, <https://peoplesunderthreat.org/>.

102 Martin Masse, “Nationalisme et démocratie sont-ils compatibles?,” *Le Devoir*, May 7, 1994.

103 Elizabeth C. Speyer, “Weaseling Quebec into Independence,” *The Gazette*, November 24, 1989.

Such a choice of words might make sense in a colonial context or a totalitarian state where certain groups are deprived of rights and have limited capacity for agency. It is not salient in a democratic society like Quebec, where English speakers not only have a stake and participative role in provincial governance, but are a part of the linguistic majority at the federal level. The bilateral play of federal-provincial power negotiations in Canada ensures that many official language groups are minorities in some jurisdictions and majorities in others, thereby providing them with even more agency than minorities in other contexts.

## Whataboutism

Whataboutism, more formally (and formerly) known as a *tu quoque* logical fallacy, is a way of deflecting criticism or reversing an accusation by “arguing that an opponent is guilty of an offense just as egregious or worse than what the original party was accused of doing, however unconnected the offenses may be.”<sup>104</sup> It was a frequent tactic in the Cold War, and continues to be used today. China, for instance, responds to accusations of mistreatment of Uyghurs by seeking to delegitimize its accusers through questions like “what about the lynching of Black people?” or “what about Indigenous residential schools?”<sup>105</sup>

The “best-treated minority” argument frequently occurs in my sample as a form of whataboutism. In response to grievances by English speakers in Quebec, injustices or inequitable access to services for French-speaking minorities outside Quebec will be raised. This does not directly address the grievance but rather seeks to deflect away from it and diminish it by raising the grievances of another group, positioning Quebec English speakers as better- or “best-treated.” Needless to say, two wrongs don’t make a right.

## Intimidation or Silencing Tactic?

Many people within the English-speaking community have felt that these discursive power strategies are often used as an intimidation or silencing tactic to shut down grievances. Lawyer Peter Blaikie said that referring to English speakers as a “best-treated minority” was a way of telling them “de se taire et de rester dans leur coin.”<sup>106</sup> There is certainly some truth to this, particularly in the case of direct ad hominem attacks or the “most spoiled” variation described earlier. For instance, this 1980 letter in *Le Devoir* leaves no doubt as to the author’s (minimal) openness to grievances by English speakers: “[Vous] faites partie de la minorité la mieux traitée, la plus gavée, la plus extraordinairement privilégiée qui existe dans le monde.”<sup>107</sup>

104 “What About ‘Whataboutism?’,” Merriam-Webster, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/whataboutism-origin-meaning>.

105 “China’s Human Rights ‘Whataboutism,’” *Democracy Examined* (blog), Renew Democracy Initiative, July 15, 2021, <https://rdi.org/chinas-human-rights-whataboutism/>.

106 Joyce Napier, “Les anglophones du Québec sont dans une impasse,” *La Presse*, May 27, 1989. Translation: “... to shut up and to stay in their corner.”

107 Marc-André Labrecque, “Une époque terminée,” *Le Devoir*, October 21, 1980.

Nevertheless, one should not assume that the phrase is always used to deflect or shut down grievances by English speakers. The phrase can even be used in good faith to assert a continuing legacy of openness toward English-speaking Quebecers. It can also be used to model the fair-minded approach in Quebec as a potential solution to grievances by other minorities. The historical survey above reveals many “good faith” uses of the phrase, especially but not exclusively prior to the 1980s.

## Conclusion

The “best-treated minority” phrase goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Quebec, perhaps even farther. For many decades, it was used primarily by Francophones to refer to Quebec’s Protestant, and later English-speaking, minority. English speakers did not raise any objections, and those quoted in the press were generally in agreement with their favourable position in Quebec, especially compared with Francophone minorities outside the province. The phrase became increasingly contentious in the 1980s, and has remained so ever since. As the socioeconomic condition of English speakers declined overall, they were more likely to balk at the notion that they received exemplary treatment as a minority. Francophone use became increasingly restricted to sovereignists and language hawks. Although the phrase’s use has declined since the year 2000, it has seen a resurgence in recent years.

The caricature of the spoiled and ungrateful English-speaking Quebecer persists in the popular imagination today, obscuring a more complex reality. In 2021, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages surveyed Canadians on a variety of myths related to official language minority communities. They asked Canadians whether they believed that “the English-speaking minority in Quebec is more socio-economically privileged than the French-speaking majority.” Forty-eight percent of French speakers believed this to still be true, and an additional 22% were unsure or preferred not to answer. Conversely, only 12% of English speakers believed it to be true.<sup>108</sup> This shows that, at a policy level, there is still work to do in debunking enduring myths about Quebec’s English-speaking minority, particularly among Francophones, to ensure equitable treatment. Doing so would certainly help alleviate some of the cognitive dissonance between linguistic communities engendered by the “best-treated minority” claim. This would ideally put the tired and contentious claim to rest once and for all to ensure productive dialogue rather than polemical exchanges between linguistic communities.

108 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Official Languages Tracking Survey 2021,” Report prepared for the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages by Environics Research Group, January 13, 2022; additional information on percentage of Francophones who responded “not sure/prefer not to answer” provided to the author by Robert Talbot, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, March 22, 2022.

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## APPENDIX A

### Summary of arguments for/against “best-treated minority” claim in media sample since 1980

| Arguments supporting claim that English speakers are best-treated minority  | # of mentions in sample |
|---|-------------------------|
| Access to better/more numerous institutions than Francophones outside Quebec, particularly educational institutions at the post-secondary level.  | 9                       |
| Official recognition at the provincial level as a minority with rights to its own institutions, particularly in health care and education.  | 8                       |
| Relative position of languages. The English language is not threatened in North America, whereas French is in a fragile position; an asymmetrical approach is needed, which justifies restrictions introduced by language laws. | 3                       |
| Funding inequities: Francophone institutions receive less funding per capita than English-speaking community institutions.  | 4                       |
| English speakers are a dominant minority that takes advantage of the tolerance and fair play of French Quebec; they refuse to recognize their minority status and position themselves as martyrs and victims.                   | 3                       |
| Self-exclusion: Anglophones are to blame for not being better represented in the Quebec civil service, having excluded themselves from it and operated as a business lobby.   | 1                       |

| Arguments against claim that English speakers are best-treated minority  | # of mentions in sample |
|--|-------------------------|
| <p><b>English speakers built their own institutions, which serve the population as a whole:</b> Their existence is not due to the generosity of the Francophone majority. English speakers pay taxes and deserve a share of public funding.</p>  | 23                      |
| <p><b>Prohibition of English on signs:</b> Prohibition of minority language does not exist elsewhere in North America.</p>   | 21                      |
| <p><b>Decline of the education sector,</b> particularly elementary and secondary schools, due to restrictions on access to minority education and inadequate redistribution of Canada-Quebec Agreement funds.</p>  | 19                      |
| <p><b>Outmigration/brain drain:</b> High rate of outmigration of English speakers since the 1970s indicates tension.</p>   | 14                      |
| <p><b>Decline of access to health and social services in English,</b> including inequity of services for vulnerable English-speaking youth in the regions.</p>   | 14                      |
| <p><b>Rudeness/Anglophobia:</b> Rude treatment when speaking English in public; presence of anti-English vandalism.</p>  | 12                      |
| <p><b>Inequitable treatment relative to Francophones outside Quebec:</b> Government services and legislation has improved for OLMCs outside Quebec and declined in Quebec; community sector organizations receive less funding from federal government than Francophone OLMC organizations; OCOL is more concerned with Francophones outside Quebec than English speakers in Quebec.</p> | 11                      |
| <p><b>Silencing of concerns:</b> Use of "best-treated minority" argument to silence or downplay the legitimacy of community concerns, to depict the community as having a martyr complex.</p>  | 11                      |
| <p><b>Discrimination on the job market,</b> most frequently depicted as underrepresentation in the Quebec civil service.</p>   | 11                      |
| <p><b>State centralization leading to decline of community institutions:</b> English or bilingual institutions have been shuttered or replaced by new public administrative structures; government has steadily eroded institutions and the role of the Anglophones in them.</p>   | 6                       |
| <p><b>Erosion of access to bilingual municipal services</b> through forced mergers, changes in the law. Bilingual municipality status granted at lower percentage in Ontario.</p>  | 6                       |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Concentration of English-speaking population in a single urban area</b> makes it easier to ensure more robust institutions and English-language services than in dispersed Francophone communities outside Quebec.</p> | 5 |
| <p><b>The claim is difficult to make:</b> it is difficult to establish which of the countless minorities in the world is the best-treated.</p>   | 4 |
| <p><b>Quebec government funding:</b> English speakers pay more in taxes than they receive from the Quebec government relative to the French majority.</p>  | 3 |
| <p><b>English speakers are not a minority</b> but an integral part of Quebec.</p>  | 2 |
| <p><b>Socioeconomic inferiority</b> relative to the Francophone majority.</p>  | 2 |
| <p><b>Toponymy:</b> Erosion of place names relating to Quebec's English heritage to the profit of French.</p>  | 1 |
| <p><b>Lack of provincial government services in English.</b></p>   | 1 |
| <p><b>The existence of English-language rights groups</b> proves discontent; a "best-treated minority" would not need such groups.</p>   | 1 |
| <p><b>It's all relative.</b> The theory that a people possesses extraordinary moral qualities is dangerous: Francophones are no nicer than people elsewhere.</p>   | 1 |





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