



The Official Languages Act and the English-speaking Community of Quebec: Looking to the Future

**Remarks to the
Standing Committee on Official Languages
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Good morning Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. I feel very honored and privileged to speak to you today about my experiences as a young, English-speaker in Quebec – something I hold very close, both on a personal level and on an academic and professional level. So thank you for the invitation to testify in front of the Committee today.

As Mr. Donnelly said, I am an English-speaking youth from the Eastern Townships. Like many young Quebecers, my hope is to remain a fully engaged member of my Province, contributing to its future in every way my talents allow. This goal of inclusion and participation depends on sharing Quebec's aspirations in a spirit of mutual recognition, collaboration and dialogue. We are not interested in the confrontational, individualistic approaches of the past. English-speaking youth understand their responsibilities as Canadians and citizens of Quebec to be bilingual, and in many cases we already are. We continue to work hard to achieve these skills; 80% of English mother tongue Quebecers between 15 and 45 are bilingual. In return, we expect acceptance and the space in which to preserve our English identity, and the opportunity for greater integration into Quebec society as bilingual, biliterate and bicultural Quebecers.

Since my graduation from high school, I have spent a number of years studying and living outside the province, and travelling abroad. And it is through these experiences that I can truly tell you that there is a unique Quebec English identity. Many people are surprised to learn that an English-speaking population exists within Quebec's borders. People frequently asked me how it was that I spoke English so well. To me, this has always been a testament to the uniqueness of my

background as an English-speaking Quebecker, living as a minority within a French majority, which is of course a minority within Canada. We are unique because we have the opportunity to become bilingual, because we live in a dynamic place where people speak French or English, or both. And we often feel that when we leave Quebec, there is something missing. We value the bilingual and bicultural home from which we came. And many of us want to stay here – or come home.

But the reality is that English-speaking youth in Quebec face lower political participation and representation and higher unemployment rates compared to their Francophone counterparts. We are effectively barred from the Quebec civil service (with a participation rate of 0.2. %). For example, my Masters degree is meant to effectively train me to work in the federal or provincial civil service – but I know that it will be a major challenge, and perhaps even an obstacle for me, to be able to serve in public service of my province, because I am an English-speaker. In contrast, many of my classmates will return to their home provinces to work in the provincial civil service, building on a sense of identity, belonging and ownership that is not available to me and others like me.

Moreover, young English-speakers also find it difficult to attain skilled trades. In the 2006 census for example, citizens whose first official language is English made up 13% of the workforce, but only represented less than 9% of jobs in the Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations. For many, the hope of economic well being and belonging lies elsewhere, beyond the regions in which they grew up in search of opportunities in Montreal or out of province. Ironically, our bilingualism is a real asset for employers beyond Quebec, at the same time

being an English-speaker puts us at an economic disadvantage at home. For a person like me, who will graduate with 2 degrees, the statistical likelihood of residing in the province is low. Statistics show that the higher the level of education attained, the lower the probability that graduates will return to Quebec.

While the number of English-speakers in Quebec aged 15 to 19 increased between 1991 and 2006 by 6.6%, the number of those aged 20 to 34 decreased by 21%. This decline has an obvious effect on rural communities, adding to the challenges the English Speaking Community faces in maintaining community vitality. Such is the reality in my home region, for example, where there is a considerable “missing middle”.

On a positive note, today’s youth clearly express their desire to stay in Quebec and contribute to Quebec society. They wish to move away from past conflicts and insecurities as they embrace bilingualism, social cohesion and an authentic desire to put an end to the “two solitudes”. We also know that the rate of out-migration is slowing; more of our young people are choosing to stay in Quebec than leave in search of other opportunities. This bilingual, highly-educated cohort has made the effort to gain the linguistic skills needed to fully participate in Quebec society. They have done this by seeking and receiving more and better French language instruction, linking to our French society, and being able to see a future in Quebec. The youth of the English-speaking Community of Quebec are a tremendous resource, capable of not simply translating the English-speaking

world, but acting as organic linguistic brokers, able to bridge cultural as well as linguistic barriers.

The recently published IRRP report produced by Michel Pagé and Patricia Lamarre entitled *L'intégration linguistique des immigrants au Québec*, explains the importance of the English-speaking Community of Quebec to our society. An integrated bilingual English-speaking Community is critical to the continued economic health of Quebec. This January, the Government of Quebec held a 'Rencontre économique 2010', at which the Premier directed that studies be undertaken to find ways education and employment needs can be matched, incentives provided to ensure young talented people stay in Quebec, and to ensure education and training opportunities are widely accessible. He also called for the establishment of an, "environment conducive to entrepreneurship, taking into account specific regional needs." These are all issues of critical importance to the youth of Quebec's English-speaking Community. There need to be incentives for us to come back or to remain in our communities and/or, in our province.

Myself and the QCGN believe that the retention of young Quebecers is a critical element of our economic and social future. Also critical is our capacity to build communities in which: our youth feel a sense of ownership and pride; economic opportunity and challenge exist; and, which include strong institutions that provide providing services that allow us – the youth - to visualise a future within that community.

Bilingualism, a sense of belonging and ownership, economic opportunity and challenge, education, arts and culture, immigrant integration; these are the cornerstone upon which our Community must be built, and the metrics against which vitality and sustainability must be measured. We count on increased support from the Government of Canada to help to achieve success, and we need it soon.

Our educational institutions are key players in working towards this goal. Our English schools need better integration into Francophone Quebec society. I am a true believer that language and culture cannot just be learned inside the classroom, but through social engagements. For instance, I attended an English high school in a building shared with a French high school. Both schools were administered by English and French school boards, respectively. No effort was made to integrate or harmonize activities between schools. There was an English side and a French side – and this division was evident on the playground. It is divisions such as these that further perpetuate “the two solitudes” that have existed in Quebec for some time. And it is partly for this reason that 21% of English mother tongue children in Quebec attend French schools; a number that is increasing. Off the Island of Montreal, our primary and secondary education system is in trouble. But English schools remain at the heart of our community vitality, and their ongoing existence are crucial to our families, our sense of self and our communities. They are hubs for building social, human and economic capital; they are not just centres of learning, but centres for community fundraisers, for kids and parents to develop lasting friendships through

extracurricular activities, and they are also places of employment for many of our small communities.

Moreover, employment services are not available to the majority of our youth in their official language. We see dedicated understanding civil servants at both the regional and national level trying to find ways to support our Community, but they are stymied in their efforts by a lack of coherent, consistent and continuous official language policy, and by jurisdictional concerns.

The youth of Quebec continue to fulfil their end of the bargain, achieving scholastically and linguistically. The grade 11 students in the English Montreal School board achieve higher marks on their Provincial French language exams than their peers in the Commission scolaire de Montréal. We call upon the Government of Canada fulfil its obligations towards the English-speaking youth in Quebec. Engage with us in a formal, meaningful, sustained way to ensure our success. Ensure our access to service and opportunity within an accountable framework when entering into bi-lateral agreements with Quebec. Lead the process of demonstrating that we are a valuable and recognized asset to Canada and Quebec. Make your programmes coherent in the Quebec context, easy to access, and encourage and support our enthusiasm, initiative and passion. Provide us the opportunity to engage with youth from the Francophone minority outside Quebec – in French - so that we may share experiences and move forward together. We want to stay in Quebec, but often our chances of staying are stacked against us – we are more than willing and more than able citizens of Quebec. I urge you today, for the sake of tomorrow, to help us live in our home

province, to allow us enjoy our unique background as well as our unique contemporary bicultural context. Allow us to enjoy both this quality of life, along with opportunity.

Thank you for again for the opportunity to address you today. And I sincerely hope that my experiences and my advice will be carefully considered.