



The Official Languages Act and the English-speaking Community of Quebec: Learning from the Past

**Remarks to the
Standing Committee on Official Languages
Tuesday, March 24, 2010**

*Presented by Robert Donnelly,
President*

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for the invitation to testify in front of the Committee today on the English-speaking Community of Quebec's experience with the Official Languages Act over the past 40 years.

This may be my last time testifying in front of this Committee. I retire this June from my position as President of the QCGN. It has been an honour and privilege to serve my Community over the years. I would like to personally thank this Committee for the assistance it has provided the QCGN during my tenure to advance the issues affecting the English-speaking Community of Quebec, and to provide Canada's English Official Language Minority Community with an opportunity to provide an equitable voice in our collective and continuing search for realizing the substantive equality of English and French in Canada.

I would like to begin today by very briefly summarizing our Community's experience with the Official Languages Act. I then intend to move on to how those experiences have impacted the English-Speaking Community of Quebec and the barriers to our collective vitality and sustainability. I would then request the Chair to pass the floor to my colleague Nicola Johnston. Ms. Johnston is the co-Chair of

our Board's Youth Standing Committee. It is appropriate that she voice the concerns and aspirations of her Community moving forward. This young Canadian leader, like so many of her peers is bilingual, well educated, and motivated to stay and participate in Quebec society. We must understand how we can help her and her generation fulfill that ambition.

For the benefit of new members, please let me begin describing the English-speaking Community of Quebec. There is a lot of myth surrounding English-speaking Quebec. Many continue to conjure images of wealthy, white, Christian Westmount elite who summer in Georgetown. The reality is that we are the most diverse of Canada's official language communities. 23% of us belong to a visible minority living life as a minority within a minority with all the social and economic consequences that implies. For example, in 2006, university-educated blacks from our Community had an unemployment rate of 10.9 per cent — a number on par with non-black high school dropouts. The median income of English-speaking Quebec is less than the majority, and our unemployment levels higher. Like other official language minority communities, ours is aging and declining at an accelerated rate compared to the majority. Also like Canada's other

official language minority communities, we experience high levels of outmigration.

Another challenge for our community is the assumption that English-speakers have ready access to Arts and Culture. However, the omnipresence of American generic electronic media does not reflect the experience of our Community, and cannot be counted on to tell our stories in our voice. The English Language Arts Network is trying hard right now to make this point clear with the CRTC.

Another challenge faced by our Community is access to health and education services in English. Yes we have English hospitals; on the Island of Montreal and Quebec City. But there is a lack of English language care available in the regions, especially for the elderly members of our Community, many of who are isolated, unilingual, and without the benefit of family and community support structures. English-school boards exist providing English language education in Quebec. But in the regions, our young people do not have the same types of access or opportunity available in specialized fields of study and pursuit, drawing young people away from their homes to pursue

opportunity. We are in short, a Community in need of support to maintain its vitality and sustainability.

We have studied the report issued by the FCFA in November of last year entitled *The Implementation of the Official Languages Act: a New Approach – a New Vision*, and broadly support its findings and recommendation. We would however like to help the Committee view the report from the perspective of the English-speaking Community of Quebec.

Like the FCFA, we are critical of the 1991 Official Languages Regulations that base services on demographic calculations rather than the territorial principle. Canada's linguistic minority communities are in demographic decline. Rural and isolated communities are especially vulnerable. Framing Section IV in isolation, as the FCFA's report aptly points out, negates the Act's first two purposes: communicating with or providing services to the public and in carrying out the work of federal institutions; and, supporting the development of English and French linguistic minority communities. These purposes can only be met when services are considered within the context of supporting the vitality of communities; they are linked. Services may be easier to quantitatively measure, and are therefore seductive in a results based

management system, but perhaps a renewed emphasis could be found towards the qualitative goals the Act seeks to attain.

We fully endorse the FCFA's "Three C" approach to ensure the intention of the Official Languages Act is realized. The Act must be understood and applied in a way that is coherent, constituent and continuous. We would particularly like to emphasise the need to align the provision of English services with Provincial frameworks; the official language minority community should always benefit from the most generous programme. The Federal Government must accept responsibility for ensuring the provision of services that ensure the vitality of official language minority communities where such services are not provided by the provincial government.

The QCGN also fully supports the FCFA's recommendations regarding an improved governance model, especially those suggestions that call for centralized coordination of the Act within the Privy Council Office, and the development of a 'corporate culture' of linguistic duality that understands and actively and instinctively includes both of Canada's Official Language Minority Communities. This is an especially important point for the English-speaking Community of Quebec, whose influence and inclusion in official language processes is improving, but is still far from equal with the Francophone minority outside Quebec.

We were appalled for example at the recent Speech from the Throne, which failed to include the English-speaking Community of Quebec in referencing the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality Roadmap, the core strategy which outlines the Government of Canada's major policy directions toward linguistic duality and the development of official-language minority communities. How is this omission going to be understood by the bureaucrats managing the current Roadmap and those beginning the design of its replacement in 2013? Who decided to understand duality as meaning one? Last week I wrote seeking a meeting with the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages. We await an answer.

Finally we also endorse the FCFA's call for increasing the powers of the Commissioner of Official Languages. It is clear to the QCGN that the English-speaking Community of Quebec is best served by an empowered, apolitical guardian of linguistic rights. It is a matter of record that on matters of education, employment and immigration, the Government of Canada has negotiated bi-lateral agreements with the province of Quebec without substantive consultation with the English-speaking Community of Quebec, and without any mechanisms to account for how federal funding supports our Community's vitality. In

practical terms, the Government of Canada's responsibilities under Section VII of the Official Act towards our Community are scrubbed when federal powers are devolved, or funding provided to Quebec. An empowered Commissioner of Official Languages could play an important role in this process, especially if he or she ensured the Government of Canada met its obligations towards the English-speaking Community of Quebec in the Governments bi-lateral dealings with Quebec.

Why should this be a policy priority? Our Community lives Canada's linguistic duality every day. We have the highest level of bilingualism in the country. We are proud of our continuing contribution to Canada and Quebec, and our unique and special culture and identity, but are frankly growing weary of not being recognized at best and ignored at worst. This is especially distressing when this recognition, understanding and active support continually fails to be demonstrated by the leadership of the Government of Canada. We strongly support Francophones in Quebec and in Canada, and understand the reasonable measures necessary to support and strengthen the French language. Our Community is certainly not concerned with the health and vitality of the English-language, which we expect will continue to do quite well on its own. The English-speaking Community of Quebec's

is concerned about its vitality and the long-term sustainability of its identity. The Community's goal is integration, the attainment of French language skills for its youth, and the inclusion of the Community in all aspects of Quebec society. A strong, integrated, bilingual and engaged English-speaking Community in Quebec is the model of Canadian linguistic duality.

The QCGN applauds and endorses in principle the recommendations proposed by the FCFA towards helping the Official Languages Act achieve its goal and purposes. However, we do demand that the English-speaking Community of Quebec be provided equal voice and equitable consideration in its application. The English-speaking Community of Quebec, which demonstrates by example the notion of additive bilingualism, should be recognized as a vital Canadian asset, and supported appropriately by the Government of Canada.

With the permission of the Chair, I would now like to introduce Nicola Johnston, the co-Chair of my Board's Youth Standing Committee. Nikki Johnston is a second year graduate student from Carleton University, completing a Masters in Public Policy and Administration. Ms. Johnston holds a BA with Honours in Anthropology from St Francis Xavier University. Originally from the Eastern Townships, Nikki's graduate

research has focused on the interests of the English-speaking Community of Quebec.