

STATEMENT BY ALLIANCE QUEBEC PRESIDENT WILLIAM JOHNSON ON THE WITHDRAWAL OF VEQ.

The decision of Voice of English Quebec to disaffiliate from Alliance Quebec has chiefly symbolic significance. It is a rebuff delivered to AQ president William Johnson and a repudiation of his approach to defending English in Quebec.

In fact, AQ and the Quebec City-centered VEQ will continue to meet regularly and cooperate on common objectives, as we do already, in the framework of the Network of Regional Associations, and also the Human Resources Development Committee. These are the significant forums where AQ and VEQ meet.

But VEQ has also been an affiliated autonomous regional association within the broad, loosely structured federation that is called Alliance Quebec. Unlike AQ's own chapters and Youth Commission, the participation of the autonomous regional associations is very limited: it amounts to the right to attend AQ's annual convention, to vote for policies there and for the president of AQ and its treasurer. One may also cast a vote for the AQ board of directors and be elected to that board.

In fact, though, the almost total absence of VEQ from AQ for a decade is documented in the resolution adopted by its board last week. It states:

“WHEREAS Voice of English Québec, after almost 10 years of not sending voting delegates to the Alliance Québec convention, elected to send a full delegation to Alliance Québec's May 30, 1998, convention in support of the more moderate policies...”

So what has happened is that VEQ has now formalized its long absence from AQ. It followed the route of another autonomous regional association, The Townshippers' Association, which had sent only observers, not voting delegates, to AQ conventions since 1993, and last year sent not even an observer. They severed their formal connection with AQ this year, but this had been in the works for more than a year, and had nothing to do with the election of Johnson as president, according to its then president Theodora Brinkman.

So it is evident that there has been a divergence for some time in the movement for English rights. What has happened in the last seven months,

with the candidacy and the election of Johnson, is that, debate, clash of views, has been carried out in public, in newspapers, on radio and on television, as well as in E-mail, on the phone, in public meetings and in private conversations.

All of a sudden, the status and problems of the English-speaking community have become a matter for very public scrutiny. The attempt to get English on signs in stores over the past five weeks put these issues at the center of the agenda. All of Quebec was talking about our issues.

This is a great break with the past and, not surprisingly, many people who were in the movement during its more quiet days are perturbed. But to say that this is entirely a negative development would be to misunderstand what is happening. Alliance Quebec had lost a great number of members over the years. In the past seven months, its membership has increased by 57 per cent, to 4,179, and climbing.

The largest and most active of the regional associations, the Chateauguay Valley English-Speaking People's Association, had effectively withdrawn from AQ several years ago. CVESPA returned in force this year because of Johnson, and is now cooperating actively with AQ to pursue common objectives. The recent sign initiative which saw Eaton's stores picketed to get English signs was backed by CVESPA, by Outaouais Alliance and by the Gaspé-based CASA (Committee for Anglophone Social Action).

Alliance Quebec believes the current debate is necessary, even if painful at times. It will lead to conflicts and confrontations in the short run, but should lead in the long run to a larger, stronger, more effective movement for English rights.