

For immediate release

Substantive Overhaul for Official Languages Act is Overdue

Montreal, September 24, 2020 – The annual report issued today by the Commissioner of Official Languages underscores the breadth and depth of the preparatory work contributed to modernizing the Official Languages Act by linguistic minority communities across Canada. “The time for talk and promises is past; a substantive overhaul is overdue,” said Geoffrey Chambers, president of the Quebec Community Groups Network.

“Both the House of Commons and the Senate, as well as the Minister of Official Languages, have consulted widely on this matter,” he added. “All have issued reports that reinforce the urgent need to update this key piece of legislation.”

“The Official Languages Act turned 50 a year ago and we had all hoped that we would celebrate with a modern act to take us into its second half-century,” Chambers said.

In his report, Official Languages Commissioner Raymond Th  berge stressed the need for emergency services in both official languages – a point hit home by the pandemic.

“It is clearly unacceptable for a French- or English-speaking Canadian to be deprived of information that affects their health and safety,” said Sylvia Martin-Laforge, the QCGN’s Director General. “When your security is in jeopardy, it is important to be able to communicate and to receive services and relevant instructions and information in one’s own language.”

“Respect for core values like the equality of English and French is especially important in times of stress. You just don’t abandon these principles.”

The Commissioner’s report also expressed concern about minority language education rights, particularly Quebec’s Bill 40 which abolishes democratically elected school boards and replaces them with government run service centres. In addition, Mr. Th  berge also raised Quebec’s continued refusal to sign the national Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction. Failure to sign this protocol conceals where federal resources earmarked for minority language education are actually being spent. This principle of transparency, the Commissioner said, is just as important to Quebec’s English-speaking community as it is to French-speaking communities in other parts of the country.

The QCGN is dismayed by comments in the report that indicate that senior federal officials are clinging to an outdated stereotype of English-speaking Quebec as a wealthy elite. “The median income and employment status of English-speaking Quebecers is chronically below that of Quebec’s French-language majority,” Chambers emphasized. In fact, he added, in some regions of our province the unemployment rate for English-speaking Quebecers is double that of the majority.

“Poverty is a real problem in English-speaking Quebec,” he said: “To hang on to the myth that all is well in our community is willful ignorance.”

The Quebec Community Groups Network is a not-for-profit organization bringing together English-language community organizations across Quebec. As a centre of evidence-based expertise and collective action it identifies, explores and addresses strategic issues affecting the development and vitality of the English-speaking community of Quebec and encourages dialogue and collaboration among its member organizations, individuals, community groups, institutions and leaders.

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