



Modernization of the Official Languages Act
House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages:
Townshippers' Association
Opening Remarks
February 26, 2019

Check against delivery

Good morning Mr. Paradis, Mr. Clarke, Mr. Choquette, and members of the House Standing Committee on Official Languages. I am Rachel Hunting, the Executive Director of Townshippers' Association, a not for profit organization that works in the areas of heritage and culture, community development, access to health and social services, support for seniors, and youth retention in Quebec' historical Eastern Townships.

Our region is home to just over 40 000 individuals who identify their first official language spoken (FOLS) as English (Pocock 2018). Youth retention continues to challenge the renewal and vitality of our communities; the proportion of English-speakers aged 45 and up outweighs the proportion of those 0-44 (52.5% to 47.6% respectively) (Pocock, 2018). Out-migration, while having somewhat stabilized in recent years, has left many of our rural communities vulnerable with high levels of unemployment and low levels of income, even for those with higher education (Pocock 2018).

In 2016, just over half (53.2%) of English-speakers in the historical Eastern Townships held a high school certificate or less and their tendency to have a low income was elevated (40%) when compared to their French-speaking counterparts (Pocock 2018). Levels of unemployment were also higher among English-speakers (7.1%) in the HET (Pocock 2018). Provincially in 2016, 38.5% of English-speakers found themselves in a low-income bracket compared to 31.8% of the majority community; unfortunately, low income is higher among English-speakers in our region with the percentage of those earning \$50,000.00 or more per year also falling below that of their French-speaking neighbours (18.9% vs. 23.5%) (Pocock 2018).

We have been asked to provide our community's input into this committee's study on modernization of the Official Languages Act. Before I begin, Townshippers would like to offer its support and agreement with the concepts put forward in the modernization briefs submitted to this committee by the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada (FCFA), and Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN).

We feel particularly strongly that the Official Languages Act must highlight the principle of the equality of status of English and French. There can be no separate status or approach for each language. Further,



the Act must categorically guarantee this equality of status in all institutions subject to the Act across Canada.

These are more than just words to us. It must be demonstrated by national official languages leaders like yourselves, who must make a concerted effort to understand and address the concerns of Canada's English and French linguistic minority communities.

Community's like our must also see demonstrable signs that a modernized act is applied in a way that adapts to the specific context and needs of different communities – the concept of substantive equality. And this flexibility and customization comes through consultation, which must be robust, mandatory, and properly-resourced consultation at all levels.

A few thoughts on consultation. The best consultations we participate in, are discussions with institutions we know, and that have a clear aim and are properly prepared. It is about joint problem solving; tackling challenges together. This type of relationship takes time, energy, and resources to build. And be aware that these consultations invariably take place between public institutions and community sector organizations with the resources and capacity to engage. There are many community organizations who do not have this ability, and whose supported communities are muted, and needs unmet.

In practical terms, we would like to see much more clarity in a modernized act. This means giving definitions to terms like “positive measure”, “enhancing the vitality of”, and “assisting in the development of” official language minority communities. These terms must be defined by the community's they effect; they cannot be externally imposed.

Groups like mine do most of our work with provincial governments, who have jurisdiction over areas critical to our community like education, health and social services, and employment. So, we are naturally curious about federal transfers, and the wording of related federal – provincial agreements. We firmly believe that federal official language obligations are attached to federal money, and this means clear and enforceable language clauses that are consistent across Canada.

We've been asked to comment on the establishment of an administrative tribunal to give more force to a modernized act. Let me just say that English-speaking community's like mine do not see ourselves reflected in many federal official languages' structures – Parliamentary committees, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Court Challenges Program to name a few. I go back to the principle of equality within the Act. If an administrative tribunal is established, its composition must be legislated to contain equal representation from Canada's English and French linguistic minority communities, and the diversity contained therein.



Finally, the current act does not go far enough in bringing English and French Canadians together. This is a shame, since in our experience as Townshippers, English and French Canadians working together in an atmosphere of trust and common purpose is a great thing; we have great success with peer mentorship initiatives, artist networking evenings, community forums, and projects dedicated to building the confidence our French-speaking partners need to feel comfortable offering their services to members of our community. So, we would like to see programs that promote the value of bilingualism; and please do not only focus these efforts on convincing English Canadians to speak French. Where I come from there is a great appetite to learn English, and I hope we're past thinking of these aspirations as a threat to the French language!

Thank you again for inviting us here today, I look forward to your questions.

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