

What is the Difference Between a Common and Official Language?

At the House Committee on Official Languages' [meeting](#) on Jan, 31, 2023, a Bloc Québécois motion to insert "French as the common language of Quebec" into Canada's *Official Languages Act* (OLA) was defeated. A majority of MPs on the committee studying [Bill C-13](#), which would amend the OLA were uncomfortable with the concept of a 'common language' being contained in Canadian legislation.

The QCGN does not support the use of the term "common language", which was used in Bill 96 to unilaterally amend the Constitution Act, 1867. ([See our brief beginning at p.19](#)).

The idea of a common language is much different than an official language. An official language is the language that is used by government to communicate internally, and with its citizens. A common language on the other hand is the language that people use in a given society to communicate with each other. Mario Beaulieu (Bloc Québécois Member of Parliament for La Pointe-de-l'Île) gave an excellent explanation of what a common language is during last week's committee meeting; the language used by two people when they meet on the street.

Federal language laws tend to deal with Canada's official languages, although there are provisions that support minority common languages. Quebec's language law – the *Charter of the French Language* – legislates French as both the official and common language.

Recall that Bill 96 added the following the preamble to the Charter of the French Language:

Whereas the National Assembly recognizes that French is the only common language of the Québec nation and that it is essential that all be aware of the importance of the French language and Québec culture as elements that bind society together, and whereas it is resolved therefore to ensure that everyone has access to learning French and to perfecting knowledge and mastery of that language, and to make French the language of integration; (emphasis added)

Some have argued that Quebec has two official languages, since Section 133 of the Constitution Act, 1867, permits the use of English or French in the debates of the National Assembly, and requires both languages to be used in its records and journals. English and French may also be used in the Courts of Quebec. The QCGN has not gone that far. In fact, our [Principle with Respect to Official Languages](#) recognizes French as the province's official language.

But the QCGN has never endorsed the idea of a common language. In fact, we have been very circumspect about the idea and its link to ethno-linguistic nationalism. That is why the

QCGN recognizes French as the official language of Quebec but does not support or refer to French as the common language of Quebec.