

Canada: a contemporary biligual country



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Canada is one of the few countries in the world that is bilingual and is trying to stay that way. The government and its people have tried to give both languages equal status, but hardships ensue. The country's bilingualism has historical roots, but creates several problems in the society today.

The first official government action to help support bilingualism was in 1867 with the British North America Act. This provided the use of English and French in the legislative and judicial branches of the government. It also made a provision for denominational schools, for the Protestant anglophones and Catholic francophones were harboring unrest between each other. The next step was the Manitoba Act in 1870, which made French the official language in Quebec and Manitoba, but left out the French-speaking populations of Ontario and New Brunswick. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries legislation restricted French language education in the country and virtually eliminated it in the provinces and outside of Quebec. This created major unrest between the anglophone and francophone communities and further bipolarized the issue. The unrest continued until 1963 when the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was established, whose official duty was to settle the language disputes. The main recommendations were to offer public services in both languages in places where the minority language communities were large. Also, the Commission advocated that French become a language of work in the federal administration and that government documents should be provided in both languages. In 1969 the Official Languages Act was passed that became the cornerstone of institutional bilingualism. It stated that in Parliament and public service both languages had to be equally used. This also included all federal departments.

In 1982 the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was passed which included further constitutional rights for both official languages. It also provided for the provinces and territories to set up schools for official language minorities. The Official Languages Act was passed again in 1988 when it was revised to include encouragement and financial aid to provincial governments from Ottawa.

The success of bilingualism in the country depended largely on the provinces and how willing they were to implement these rules. In 1969 New Brunswick enacted its own Official Languages Act and became the first truly bilingual province. Ontario has been expanding its use of French in the local government where the majority of Franco-Ontarians live. Manitoba is moving to translate its statutes into French for the benefit of its francophone population. Quebec has recognized French as its official language since 1974. It is bilingual at the constitutional and federal level, but gives greater status to French at the provincial level[1].

The 20th and 21st centuries have brought many changes to the bilingual policies in Canada. Legislation was passed to ensure official-language minority communities the rights to set-up and run their own schools and education programs. Also, the government has provided funds for second language instruction in both official languages in all the provinces and territories, giving large minority groups the chance to learn their official mother-tongue in schools. Another education program to support bilingualism is the French immersion program. This is provided for anglophone students mostly. The majority of classes the students take are

taught in French starting from kindergarten or the first grade (early immersion) or junior high school (late immersion).

Bilingualism has been the nest of much unrest between the anglophone and francophone communities for a long time. These two groups of peoples have a long history of struggle for territories and human rights. The anglophone community had always been in the majority and tended to dominate over the francophone community. This caused the French-speaking people to rebel against all English government policies and political ideas.

Unfortunately there wasn't a very strong resistance because they lacked strong leaders and the Catholic Church in that area was not strong enough to unite the people. In the 1860s the francophone community started to gain strength by gathering to form a strong political party, the Conservative Party. This helped them gain grounds for social and cultural gains. When the province of Quebec was created they gained even greater strength. There the francophone community took steps to ensure that the English-speaking community would not be able to create a British Canadian national state. Quebec and the central government clashed on all major political issues in the 20th century. This led to the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s. A strong nationalist movement swept through Quebec and helped reshape the francophone communities' place in Canada's government. It was then that the idea of secession first rose. Although the government took steps to settle with Quebec over this issue and to better integrate French into the whole country's federal system, this remains a highly controversial topic[2].

Today several issues have risen in connection with the government's bilingual policy. Although Canada has two official languages, English and

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French, there are still struggles to implement the equal use of them within the country. This is primarily because of unequal use of the languages among the population. According to the 2006 census, 67% of the population claims English as its mother-tongue while only 21% claims French as their mother-tongue. The remaining 12% claims a third language to be their mother-tongue, suggesting a large community of immigrants within the country (this includes the Aboriginal languages. Even so, this census has shown Chinese to be the third largest language in Canada, reported by 3% of the population claiming it as their mother-tongue.) Both anglophone and francophone populations have decreased over a 10 year period, 2% for the former and 1.4% for the latter. Within Quebec the francophone population still has a majority, 82%. The anglophone community is at about 10.6% in the province with the remaining 7.4% being immigrants[3].

These statistics create hardships for the government to uphold bilingual policies. Although politicians would like to enforce the idea of a common bilingual community, the reality looks more like the creation of two separate linguistic communities - one based in Quebec, the other in the rest of Canada. While the first vision considers Canada as one country, the second sees the center of the Canadian heartland in Quebec. This latter is the main political drive of the politics of Quebec. The politicians of Quebec would like to create a unique French community within the province to uphold the rights and culture of the French-speaking community. This belief has its extreme version, the Parti Québécois, who believe that Quebec should seek political independence from Canada to be able to wholly focus on the French language and culture. This idea of secession today is in peril. One reason is

that the young generation of Quebec does not feel the prejudice of the anglophone population and has reached equal status within Quebec. This has quenched the sense of anger that fueled this idea up until now. The second reason is that Montreal had been the hotbed for the separatists, but it has become very multiethnic and bilingual. The separatist political parties, the Parti Québécois and the Bloc Québécois, were beaten in elections showing a decline in interest in the question of secession. In all cases, the debate of the secession of Quebec is not yet over and is still a much talked about issue today[4].

Another major issue that concerns bilingualism in Canada is not the government's policies but the realization of them. Since the beginning of the 20th century there has been an increase in French Canadian participation in public services. In the 1970s all public service positions were redefined as English-speaking, French-speaking or bilingual. This helped French Canadians find employment in public services because most of them were already bilingual[5]. However there are still problems with the use of the French language in the government. Not all of the Supreme Court judges actually know French and this caused a problem recently in a case where the lawyer was francophone and made all his arguments in French. The judges were listening through interpreters, a practice that has since been banned. An extremely heated debate has recently emerged over the question of whether Supreme Court Justices should be bilingual and how much bilingualism adds to their competence[6].

Although Canada is considered an officially bilingual country historically, there are several issues that cause heated debates within the society.

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Hopefully one day both official languages will have an equal status in the lives of all Canadians.

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