

CBC NEWS (Opinion)

After 50 years of the Official Languages Act, what is the place of French in Canada?

Francophones have a role in Canada's future, including in fight to preserve Indigenous languages and culture

Sen. Raymonde Gagné and Sen. René Cormier · for CBC News · Posted: May 25, 2019 6:00 AM CT | Last Updated: May 25, 2019

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Official Languages Act and the International Day of La Francophonie on March 20, an Open Caucus was held at the Senate of Canada to reflect on the place of French in Canada.

Professors Stéphanie Chouinard, Michael MacMillan and Benoît Pelletier addressed the following question: What is the place of French in Canada 50 years after the Official Languages Act was first enacted?

The good news is that since it was enacted, the presence of the French language within government has become considerably stronger.

The federal government passed the Official Languages Act in 1969 to correct a historical injustice that partly manifested itself in the near total absence of francophones within the federal public service.

In this regard, the act was a notable success: over 43 per cent of public service positions today are now designated bilingual, and more than 96 per cent of employees in these positions have achieved the required language proficiency, according to a 2017 report by the Public Service Commission's Patrick Borbey and Matthew Mendelsohn of the Privy Council Office.

But it's not all good news.

Francophones still face challenges

Despite positive change throughout the public service over the past 50 years, the Commissioner of Official Languages still receives a significant number of complaints every year regarding the right to work in one's language, the linguistic designation of certain positions and the equitable participation of anglophones and francophones in the government.

In 2018, the commissioner received 376 admissible complaints on these issues. The Mendelsohn-Borbey report noted that 23 per cent of francophones in the federal public service do not feel free to speak the official language of their choice at meetings in their work unit and that 32 per cent do not feel free to write emails in the official language of their choice.

These challenges facing French-speaking public servants reflect the broader experience of francophones across the country. Despite the official status of French and support from most of the public (88 per cent), French is unfortunately still seen by some Canadians as belonging to a minority from the past. This perception significantly diminishes the place of French in Canada.

Yet French is a vibrant, modern and creative language that remains a cornerstone of Canadian identity. French is not the language of a single cultural group; it is a shared language and a way of life of various ethnic and cultural communities all across Canada.

Like English, French is an international language spoken on five continents that helps Canada welcome individuals from every part of the world. That is why this notion that French belongs to a single cultural group must be dispelled.

All Canadians need to understand that French is also a powerful vehicle for Canadian multiculturalism.

A role in Canada's future

While French has a strong historical and constitutional foundation in Canada, it also has an important role to play in the country's future. By promoting French across the land, Canada can position itself internationally as a vast country that can accommodate diverse immigrant families who have French in common.

We cannot enhance the standing of French in Canada without considering the debate in Parliament on Bill C-91, An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages. As we saw with the Official Languages Act, the advancement of French — which was made possible by Part 7 of the act — played an important role in preserving and enhancing the vitality of French in several parts of Canada.

As a linguistic minority, we should join in this fight to preserve Indigenous, including Métis and Inuit, languages and cultures.

In an editorial published on April 18, 2019, the president of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, Jean Johnson, called francophones to action on this issue.

As he pointed out (English translation): "The support of Indigenous peoples is a major reason that francophone communities were able to take root in Canada four centuries ago. Today, in the spirit of reconciliation, we must stand up and support them."

Accordingly, the federal government needs to fully recognize and help revitalize Indigenous languages.

Going forward, we must remember that, over the past 50 years, bilingualism and linguistic duality made progress only when citizens pressured the various levels of government to treat our official languages with respect.