

# Ottawa, December 6, 2007

## Official Languages: A Leadership Skill for the Public Service

Notes for an address to senior management and employees of the  
Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

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**Graham Fraser – Commissioner of Official Languages**

**Check against delivery**

Good afternoon,

Just over a year ago, after a 35-year career in journalism, I became the Commissioner of Official Languages. I thus went from being an interested—and passionate—observer of the Canadian language debate to being an agent of Parliament.

In my many meetings with Canadians over the last year, I have often found it useful to look back on how Canada came to develop its language policy. I would therefore like to start with a brief historical overview.

I'd like to take you back 45 years—to 1962.

In 1962, a number of factors converged to make language policy an issue. In the spring, the first terrorist bombs exploded in Quebec, set off by the FLQ—the Front de libération du Québec.

In Ottawa, as is the case today, there was a minority Conservative government led by a prime minister from the West. Neither the Conservatives nor the Liberals had managed to win a majority because of their failure to win more than a handful of seats in French-speaking Quebec.

To add to the mix, there was a group of 26 MPs from Quebec—who were almost all unilingual Francophones—and they began to shake up the quiet, but almost universal assumption that everything that mattered happened in English.

The president of Canadian National Railways, then a government-owned railway, told a House of Commons committee that none of his 17 vice-presidents were French-Canadians, suggesting that it was impossible to find any Francophones who were competent. This resulted in massive demonstrations at every French-language university in Quebec.

In this context, on December 18, 1962, Lester B. Pearson, then Liberal leader and Leader of the Opposition, called for the creation of a royal commission. “Are we ready,” he asked, “to give all young Canadians a real opportunity to become truly bilingual?”

In 1963, the Pearson government created the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which, in its preliminary report published in 1965, shocked many English-speaking Canadians by stating that Canada was passing through one of the greatest crises in its history.

In its recommendations, the Commission proposed a new partnership between English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians. In the future, the Government of Canada would function in both languages, and the provinces would be encouraged to offer services to the public in the language of the minority, where demand was sufficient. Additional measures would also be taken to recognize the contribution and heritage of other cultural communities.

In 1967, Pierre Trudeau, then Minister of Justice, defined language rights as two-fold: the right to learn and the right to use. The entire edifice of language rights constructed over the four decades since then rests on these two pillars.

The first federal official languages act was adopted in 1969. It proclaimed the equal status of English and French in all federal institutions and spelled out the demographic criteria for the delivery of service in both languages. It also created the position of Commissioner of Official Languages, an ombudsman above politics who was to be the “active conscience” of Canadians in official languages matters. I was the sixth.

The Act was amended in 1988, specifically to guarantee federal employees in certain regions the right to work in their language of choice. Today, it also includes a commitment to support official language minority communities and promote linguistic duality.

Finally, in November 2005, the Canadian Parliament strengthened Part VII of the Act. This part deals with the federal government’s commitment to fostering the full recognition and use of both English and French in Canadian society. It also commits the government to supporting the development of official language minority communities.

These facts remind us that, beyond the standards, directives and tests, Canadian linguistic duality is first and foremost one of the country’s fundamental values.

This statement has specific repercussions on all institutions seeking to play a leading national role in their areas of activity. This is as true in the business world as it is in sports and culture. And it is especially true for federal institutions, which are at the public's service.

That is why the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is subject to the *Official Languages Act*. You are national leaders and innovators in the housing sector. I find it interesting that, when it was founded in 1946, CMHC's initial mission was to support military personnel returning from Europe with the hope of going back to their civilian lives. Today, you help Canadians, whether they were born here or somewhere else in the world, build lives for themselves and set up a home.

In short, you help these people build a country. Yet Canada was built in English and in French. Even today, these two languages are a bridge between us all, the two languages of communication of a diverse and ever-changing population.

According to the Census data released Tuesday, there are still eight million Francophones in Canada, including seven million in Quebec, and four million of them do not speak any English. Federal institutions must be able to communicate with these people and understand the world in which they live.

Yet all too often, language requirements in federal institutions are seen as a burden rather than an opportunity to show leadership, as boxes to be ticked rather than an essential skill, as hoops to be jumped through rather than the ability to communicate.

My message is this: linguistic duality is a value that must be embodied by all levels of your organization. It has always been a part of your mission and your role as a national leader.

In their recent book entitled *Made in Canada Leadership*, a study of leadership in Canada, Amal Henein and Françoise Morissette identify what they call the five cornerstones of the Canadian leadership brand: harmony, integrity, quality, resourcefulness and inclusiveness.<sup>1</sup> Serving Canadians and managing public servants in the language of their choice is fully consistent with these values.

Interestingly, Henein and Morissette's selection of leaders from the public, private and co-op sectors was both wide-reaching and representative: 27% of those interviewed were French-speaking, but only 10% indicated that they were bilingual. In other words, at least 17% of the leaders, and therefore over half of the Francophones, were unilingual French-speakers. This reality, that there is a solid number of highly successful unilingual French-speaking Canadians, is often overlooked in English-speaking Canada. But this is one of the fundamental reasons for federal language policies: to ensure that French-speaking Canadians, whether they are bilingual or unilingual, are served by their federal government as effectively as English-speaking Canadians are.

Although this is an essential component of high-quality service, the value of linguistic duality has yet to be fully integrated into federal institutions. It remains a source of untapped potential and in my opinion a critical aspect in the renewal of an organization such as yours.

Put differently, every time a citizen has trouble getting service in the language of his or her choice, or is told "would you like someone who speaks French," the perception grows that linguistic duality at the institution stops with the little blue sign advertising bilingual service.

You have already had considerable success in this area. The Office of the Commissioner is here to help you continue your efforts.

My role as language ombudsman involves ensuring that the Government and federal public service abide in a proactive way by the *Official Languages Act*. I receive complaints directly from members of the public concerning federal institutions. I investigate them and recommend

corrective action when necessary. My office receives almost 1,000 complaints every year. Most come from people who did not receive service in the official language of their choice when they were entitled to it, but we also investigate complaints relating to language of work and the federal government's obligation to support the development of official language communities.

In a spirit of supporting federal institutions in the implementation of their obligations, and in order to ensure that the language rights of citizens, employees and communities are fully respected, I am reviewing other methods that could be added to the investigations, audits and report cards that we already use. I plan on expanding this role through intervention mechanisms that are based on a more effective dispute resolution process and the prevention of problems that cause these disputes. Through co-operation initiatives and a comprehensive approach, we can deal with the issues at federal institutions and, I hope, get better results.

But linguistic duality is not limited to service to the public. So then, what are the other characteristics of an organization that fully respects linguistic duality?

There are obvious things, of course: interacting with Francophone co-workers in French and vice versa; ensuring all communications to staff are in both languages; taking the same care in both languages when preparing memos and other documents.

There is also the ability to communicate in either language, depending on the need, between the different regions and Ottawa, or even discussing with “stakeholder groups,” to use a term that is widely used and understood in the federal government, in their language.

I would like to elaborate on this last point.

Since 2005, Part VII of the *Official Languages Act* now stipulates that institutions must consult official language minority communities to propose “positive measures” to support their development and promote linguistic duality. Cases of non-compliance may be subject to investigations by my office and, eventually, legal remedy.

That seems to be clear enough. Except that the expression “positive measures” has never been used before in legislation, and the Act does not provide a definition. Some people think this is a problem, but I don't. On the contrary, this leaves the door wide open for a wide range of initiatives adapted to the mission and resources of each federal institution. The only criterion to which I refer in my annual report is that positive measures have to produce real results.

For example, Parks Canada in Jasper, Alberta gives free access to its facilities to the local Francophone association, and in exchange the association offers French courses to Parks Canada employees and members of the community. This is a good example of what can be done at the local level. Here are a few more:

- The National Film Board offers training workshops to up-and-coming Francophone filmmakers in Ontario. A similar program exists in Acadia for animated films.

- In Winnipeg, bilingual service centres have been set up in co-operation with municipal, provincial and federal governments to offer a range of French-language services under one roof.
- At the national level, VIA Rail wanted to do its part as well. As a result, this Crown corporation ended up becoming one of the main sponsors of this summer's Francophone and Acadian Community Summit.
- And we can't forget about the initiatives to promote linguistic duality. Already in 1999, well before the Act was amended, Revenue Canada published and distributed to the general public a series of fact sheets that contained information on the Francophone communities in each province.

It can be as simple as providing access to meeting rooms or telecommunications equipment from time to time, or providing distribution lists, locations where they can promote events, or access to data or expertise your organization possesses.

In short, any action that promotes community development or official languages can be considered a positive measure.

Part VII may require some institutions to modify their policies and programs so the official language communities are treated fairly, rather than simply treated in the same way. But in many cases where the institution's programs have no direct impact on official language communities, taking positive measures is not necessarily difficult or complicated. This seems to be the case for CMHC.

I think that you have already understood this quite well. When I attended the Francophone and Acadian Community Summit this summer, the CMHC logo was prominent, identifying you as one of the major sponsors of this great event. I know that you also have ties with the Quebec Community Groups Network, which is the major round table for Anglophone community organizations in Quebec. I have no doubt that you will be able to build on this co-operation and continue doing what you have always done: help people build communities.

I would therefore like to use our remaining time to discuss how you incorporate linguistic duality into your activities at CMHC and the actions you can take to better achieve your goals. I hope that today's meeting will mark the start of a closer relationship between your organization and the Office of the Commissioner.

Thank you!

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<sup>1</sup> Amal Henein and Françoise Morissette, *Made in Canada Leadership: Wisdom from the Nation's Best and Brightest on the Art and Practice of Leadership* (Canada: John Wiley and Sons, 2007).

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