

'Promoting Minority Languages: Evaluating the Work of Regional Governments'

Pierhead Building, Cardiff Bay

Cardiff, September 28, 2019

Graham Fraser

I would like to begin by thanking Elin Royles for the invitation to speak to you today. This is my third visit to Cardiff, and I am delighted to be here. Wales has been one of the success stories in the international narrative of language revival, and I have been inspired by the commitment of academics like Colin Williams and my former colleague Meri Huws, and by the work of former Minister Alun Davies.

The government's commitment to increasing the number of Welsh speakers to 1 million by 2050 is impressive, and the New York Times noted earlier this month that the success of the television series *Keeping Faith* "is credited in part with the surge of people signing up for lessons."¹

Certainly, the fact that Eve Myles learned Welsh in order to play the role of Faith Howells in English and then in Welsh is an inspiration.

One of the reasons that I agreed to come — even though I speak no Welsh at all — was to get some sense of the ongoing drama that is Brexit.

There was a referendum in Quebec in 1995 over beginning negotiations to leave Canada that was defeated by 50,000 votes or about one per cent of the votes cast (with a 94 per cent turnout).

I can't help thinking that if 30,000 votes had been different, we would have gone through what Britain has been going through for the last two years.

And whatever happens, let me hazard some reflections.

To begin with, language policies are often introduced or altered in response to a crisis. Canada's language policy was developed on the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which was created in 1963 in response to the surge of nationalism in Quebec. Language policies in countries as different as Sri Lanka and Kosovo, Catalonia and South Africa have been introduced as tools for cultural affirmation and conflict resolution.

Brexit — and even the nature of the debate over Brexit — appears to have shaken the bonds of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, and it would not be surprising if there is an impact on language policies in Wales and Scotland. International trade agreements do undermine national sovereignty, and have the unintended consequence of promoting regional cultural affirmation. Paradoxically, leaving the European Union may have a similar effect.

The omnipresence of English as an international language has emphasized the importance of minority languages in reaction to the homogenizing effects of international unilingualism.

One might assume that Brexit — if it does happen, with or without a deal — will lead to a diminution of the role of English in the remaining European Union, as French or German reasserts itself as a common European language.

I suspect that the reverse will be the case — and that the use of English will increase, not diminish.

Because if (or should I say when) Britain leaves the European Union, English will no longer be the language of one of its members, but an external language and thus a neutral language.

¹ "Eve Myles's Leap of 'Faith' Pays Off," The New York Times, September 2, 2019.

This has already become the case.

On the vaporettos that ply the canals in Venice, the announcements of the stops are made in Italian — and in English.

In Belgium, if you want to go on the website of the social security department, you type in www.socialsecurity.be. Then, you have a choice between Flemish and French. A bilingual url would be too long; English is a neutral meeting place for the two language groups.

When I taught a course on language policy and language rights at McGill University in Montreal last year, a Korean student said that he has lived in St. Petersburg, Seoul and Singapore — and there were more English signs in those cities than in Montreal, where some 600,000 English speakers live and there are two English-language universities.

The reason is that English is **not** a neutral language in Canada — and certainly not in Quebec or in Montreal.

Language legislation in Quebec has ensured that French is the public language, the common language, the language of signs, the language of government.

And English is not a neutral language in Wales. It is a dominant language, certainly — but not neutral.

In discussing the role of regional governments and minority languages in Canada, there are two very different realities: Quebec, Canada's only predominantly French-speaking province, where the English communities are in a minority, and the rest of the country, where French communities are a minority.

The Economist wrote recently that all Canadian politicians are bilingual; would that that were true.

Canada is a country of two predominantly unilingual linguistic communities that live side by side.

In Canada, only 17 per cent are bilingual in English and French; 90 per cent of English-speaking Canadians outside Quebec speak no French and in Quebec, and 60 per cent of Francophones do not speak English.

Quebec is a special case in more ways than one. Until the late 1960s, French-speakers defined themselves as French-Canadians and as a minority in Canada. For the last 50 years, they have defined themselves as Québécois, and as a majority in Quebec. Legislation defines French as the only official language of signs, legislation and the public service. However, there is an ambiguity: the overwhelming dominance of English in North America, its appeal to immigrants and the historic role of the English economic elite are all still seen as an existential threats to French by Quebec nationalists.

The key to the growth, development and vitality of minority language communities, in my view, is post-secondary education in the minority language.

The English communities in Quebec have three universities that attract students from across North America and around the world.

One of the turning points in the emergence of a vital, energetic and thriving Acadian community in New Brunswick was the creation of the Université de Moncton in the 1960s.

Similarly, the transformation of the Collège Saint-Boniface in Manitoba into a university has played a critically important role for the Franco-Manitoban community, enabling it to attract international students who often become immigrants integrated into the minority community.

Ontario — which has the largest minority Francophone community in Canada, at 600,000 — is a much more complicated case.

There are several bilingual universities in Ontario — including the University of Ottawa, Laurentian University in Sudbury and Glendon College, affiliated with York University in Toronto — but they have all had difficulties in creating a truly French-language environment, with a genuine equal status for both languages. For example, it is possible to study and graduate from

the University of Ottawa without learning French; it is more difficult to study and graduate without speaking English.

Partly as a result — and because of a shortage of post-secondary opportunities in southwestern Ontario — my former colleague and friend François Boileau issued a report recommending the creation of a French-language university in Toronto.

The previous Liberal government agreed, and the new university was incorporated and work began in establishing it.

However, in November 2018, the Conservative government announced the cancelling of the university, and the abolition of the post of Commissioner of French-language Services.

After 14,000 people demonstrated in the streets, the government back-pedalled: the staff of the Commissioner's office would be transferred to the Ontario Ombudsman's office (a similar attempt was made in Ireland a few years ago, unsuccessfully) — and the university was postponed rather than being cancelled. Negotiations with the federal government on increased federal funding for the project began in earnest over the summer.

The fundamental problem is that Canada is a federation, and the Fathers of Confederation decided in their wisdom in 1867 that the federal government would have the important powers — tariffs, the currency, the military, foreign affairs — and the trivial, inconsequential issues, like health and education, would be the responsibility of the provinces.

In the century and a half since then, Canadians have had different priorities from the Fathers of Confederation. And the implementation of our language policies have been fragmented and disjointed as a result.

As I said earlier, education is the key. And education in Canada is a provincial responsibility.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Official Languages Act. It has taken us fifty years to get to where we are now — but there is still work to be done.

The success has been in the area of service to the public. This is partly because of on-line service: it is now possible to apply for pensions, to get a passport, to pay income tax, buy a train ticket or an airline ticket online, in English or French. And federal institutions — and other institutions like Via Rail and Air Canada which, although now private companies, are subject to the Act — have found that it is much easier to have a bilingual website than to have bilingual personnel at a counter at all times.

One of the remaining challenges has been creating a bilingual federal workplace. English remains the dominant language of work.

The most interesting part of the Act has been Part VII — which requires federal institutions to take positive measures for the growth and development of minority language communities. It is a binding obligation — but positive measures have not been defined. Some of the most interesting innovations have been in regional offices, where regional departmental officials have reached out to local minority communities to find out what they think would be a positive measure for their community.

Over the last year, there has been a lot of discussion of the modernization of the Official Languages Act, which had its last major revision over 30 years ago.

There is considerable pressure from minority community organizations to give the Commissioner of Official Languages the power to impose fines on institutions that are found to be in breach of the Act. I remain sceptical about the effectiveness of fines as the best way to change behaviour; I fear that for some institutions, like Air Canada, it would become just part of the cost of doing business. However, my successor, Raymond Thériault, came up with an ingenious suggestion that would involve creating a fund for language training that would be financed in part by the penalties.

Nevertheless, in general I found as Commissioner that it was often more effective to inspire than to require.

Thank you very much.