

NEW LANGUAGE DEBATE IN THE OFFING

by Kenneth McRoberts

In the wake of the Meech Lake debacle, Canada seemed to be headed for profound change. In a great many areas the established ways of doing things clearly were no longer working — and had to be replaced. But if there was any one domain where fundamental change seemed most likely, it was language policy.

Whether on radio talk shows, at “town hall” meetings, or in scientific soundings of public opinion, official bilingualism regularly emerged as a central focus of public discontent. Thus, the report of the Citizens’ Forum on Canada’s Future called for a thorough examination of Canada’s language policy, even though the primary author of the report, Keith Spicer, had been Canada’s first official languages commissioner.

AVOIDING THE DEBATE

Yet, as it turned out, this was a debate that was not to be. Canada’s three main political parties, and national leadership in general, carefully steered clear of language policy, apparently in the belief that it was simply too explosive a topic to be the focus of a rational discussion. Alberta premier Don Getty did try to launch a debate calling for an end to any legislated status for language, but his intervention was generally dismissed as a transparent attempt to stave off the inroads of the Reform party — as, indeed, it probably was.

Now that the constitutional question, and any attempt to deal with Canada’s unity problems, has been resolutely placed on the back burner, the chances of public debate over language policy seems to be remote. Yet, it appears that, like it or not, Canadians may have such a debate after all.

As Guy Laforest notes in this issue of *Canada Watch*, Quebec government leaders may be unable to prevent a new public debate over Quebec’s notorious sign law. Bill 178’s protection under the notwithstanding clause expires in December of this year. A formal legislative vote is necessary for this protection to be extended.

Any attempt to weaken Bill 178, let alone eliminate it, is bound to produce strong opposition among large numbers of Quebec francophones. Yet, retention of the Bill, even in an attenuated form, will not go unnoticed in the rest of Canada. In all likelihood it will pro-

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voke the same deep hostility that was triggered by the introduction of the Bill five years ago. This hostility, it should be noted, went beyond the specific provisions of the Bill. Many English Canadians voiced objections to Bill 101 itself, and the very notion of legislating French pre-eminence.

ENGLISH CANADIAN OPPOSITION TO QUEBEC’S LANGUAGE LAW

For many, Bill 178 seemed in direct contradiction to an agenda that Quebecois had themselves imposed on the rest of the country: equal status for English and French

“from coast to coast.” In effect, Quebec seemed to be acting in bad faith. Quebec francophones might protest that this agenda had been Ottawa’s (or, more precisely, Trudeau’s) rather than theirs. Or they might claim that, as a language under threat, French needs protection everywhere, Quebec included, and that any equation between the situation of Quebec’s anglophone minority and that of the francophone minorities in the other provinces is fundamentally mistaken. But these subtleties were lost on most English Canadians.

In short, the upcoming debate over Bill 178 and its fate will in all likelihood not be restricted to Quebec, however much government leaders in Quebec and the rest of the country might wish that it were. And it might well extend to the underlying principles of language policy.

NEW FEDERAL VOICES

In addition, within English Canada itself there exists the basis for a major debate over language policy during the coming year. The Reform party has regularly reiterated its opposition to federal language policy. The coming federal election may well see a surge in Reform representation in the House. After all, within English Canada, Reform was the only clear winner of the referendum debacle.

For that matter, a surge in Reform representation may also be matched by a surge in Bloc québécois support. Despite appearances, the two parties may well find common ground on the language question. After all, both parties represent populations that firmly believe that someone else’s language is being “shoved down their throat.” They would probably disagree about

the status of English and French at the federal level. But the Bloc québécois would have no difficulty endorsing Reform's position that language and culture should be an exclusively provincial responsibility and that only the Quebec government, not Ottawa, should be concerned with protecting and promoting the French language.

With this new leadership at the federal level, some English Canadians might be led to look at Bill 101, if not Bill 178, in a new light. Legislating French pre-eminence in Quebec would remain unattractive but it could be made palatable if it were traded off against the principle that English should remain pre-eminent in the rest of the country.

THE TRUDEAU STRATEGY AND ITS FATE

This would constitute a radically different vision not only of the status of languages but of the country itself and how its problems should be addressed. Under the Trudeau strategy, national unity meant bringing Canadians together. The goal was to strengthen the French fact throughout the country. This meant not only teaching French to English Canadians, but reinforcing the presence throughout Canada of people whose first language is French. Bilingualism, and contact between language groups, was to be the pre-eminent national experience; Canadians were to be personally enriched by it and Canada was to achieve greatness through it, appearing as a model to the world of linguistic harmony and justice.

In the wake of the Charlottetown fiasco, Canadians may have more modest ambitions for the country. Thoroughly alienated by the interminable constitutional debate, they may well be ready to settle for a peaceable coexistence. From this perspective, the focus of language policy becomes one of reducing ir-

ritations. This means defining language policy more fully in terms of provincial majorities rather than minorities.

In point of fact, on a demographic basis, Quebec and the rest of the country are increasingly dominated by their linguistic majorities. To this extent, the Trudeau strategy failed. For instance, the 1991 census reveals that assimilationist pressures on francophones outside Quebec continue to take their toll. Outside Quebec the proportion of Canadians with French as their mother tongue who continue to use French as their home language has now dropped to 35.1 percent.

To be sure, personal bilingualism continues to grow among English Canadians — a clear legacy of the Trudeau vision of Canada. Outside Quebec, among Canadians of English mother tongue between the ages of 5 and 19, the proportion able to speak French has risen from 3 percent in 1971 to 11 percent in 1991. In effect, outside Quebec, English Canadians are becoming more conversant in French while French Canadians there are using it less.

The growth in English-Canadian bilingualism is, of course, largely the result of the remarkable expansion of immersion programs in public schools. However, recent enrollment figures suggest that this phenomenon may have reached its peak. Immersion schools have come under renewed questioning, thanks not only to heightened fiscal constraints and even some doubts about their linguistic attainment but a recognition that in terms of promoting national unity, French immersion simply has not worked; it has not brought Canadians together. But then, how could it have done so? Most English Canadians, however bilingual they may be, will have little regular contact with French Canadians, given the exceedingly

small presence of francophones in most regions outside Quebec. And how does the heightened bilingualism of English Canadians affect the day-to-day lives of the overwhelming majority of francophones, concentrated in Quebec?

In sum, Canada's postponed debate over language policy may yet take place. If it does, a consensus may emerge around a new approach in which formal equality between English and French is restricted to federal institutions, and primarily in Ottawa. At the provincial level, a single language will have official status, with the exception of New Brunswick, where demography favours formal equality. Minority language services will be provided in distinct minority-language institutions rather than within common structures, with a firm emphasis on a policy of "where numbers warrant."

Although less generous or noble than the Trudeau vision of a Canada in which both provincial and federal governments are committed to official bilingualism and the maximum expansion of minority language rights, such a "territorial" approach would probably be more generally acceptable to Canadians, and on that basis more likely to promote Canada's elusive "national unity."

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