

It Is Time for Creative Constitutional Thinking on Bilingualism and Quebec's Place in Canada

By Conrad Black

A recent countrywide poll on the [status of bilingualism](#) has attracted a good deal of comment on the relatively small minority of Canadians outside Quebec who consider it to be an important objective. Much attention has been paid to the fact that the portion of Quebecers who believe bilingualism to be important, 83 percent, is almost twice the number answering positively to the same question in the other nine provinces, 43 percent.



A man wears a Quebec flag during a Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day event in Montreal on June 24, 2022. (The Canadian Press/Graham Hughes)

The principal implications of these numbers that have been

emphasized are that official bilingualism is a myth. This is true in considerable measure, but it disguises both progress and an opportunity. The fact that nearly half of the people living outside Quebec consider bilingualism to be important and valuable is a huge step forward on what a corresponding poll would have found prior to Pierre Trudeau's campaign in favour of bilingualism nearly 60 years ago.

At that time, the number of English-speaking Canadians living outside Quebec who would have responded positively to that question was negligible. One centrepiece of Trudeau's successful campaign against the separatists in Quebec was to promote bilingualism throughout Canada and reduce its nature as a country cleaved sharply in two between English- and French-speaking elements, with, implicitly, the federal government operated by a small clique of elite bicultural politicians and senior civil servants.

Trudeau was starting from scratch with a French population of 80 percent of Quebecers, approximately half of whom effectively [voted in 1980](#) for establishing an independent country, while retaining important links with the remaining parts of Canada. The separatist vote in Quebec provincial elections had risen steadily from [9 percent in 1966 to 41.4 percent](#) in 1976. It was easy to believe, and hard to refute, the argument that it was the wave of the future.

Pierre Trudeau's [initiative in patriating](#) the formula for amendment of the Canadian Constitution from the British Parliament to the provincial and federal governments of Canada—while radically promoting the availability of government services, including broadcasting, telecasting, and commercial packaging in both languages throughout the country—was accompanied by the second centrepiece of his federalist program: a massive assortment of programs of assistance to all manner of projects and activities that was heavily targeted in favour of Quebec.

There was great resentment at that time of the supposed inconvenience of bilingual packaging, to the point that Trudeau replied at a public meeting in Alberta to someone

complaining about it being burdensome to read French wording on his breakfast cereal box: "Why don't you turn the box around?" There was also considerable resistance to what amounted to a federal response to Quebec separatist blackmail of deluging that province with money collected elsewhere in Canada.

The spirit of these programs was maintained by the succeeding federal prime ministers, all Quebecers: Brian Mulroney, Jean Chretien, and Paul Martin. And, despite the federal government's mishandling of the [1995 referendum](#), after the Conservative party had split apart with the departure of the Reform caucus and the Bloc Quebecois, leaving it [only two Conservative MPs](#) after the 1993 federal election, the separatists came within 1 percent of winning the 1995 Quebec independence referendum. But they still could not win with their trick question promising to eat the federalist cake and still have it in front of them as an independent Quebec.

The high separatist votes in Quebec referenda and the comparative strength of separatist parties in that province, along with the continuous oppression of the English language within Quebec by provincial governments, have dampened English Canadian enthusiasm for bilingualism. The official position of the Quebec government, that it effectively opposes bilingualism, does not present those Canadians where little French is spoken with an inspiring patriotic motivation to go to the considerable trouble of learning another language for the sake of fellow citizens who speak that language—and seem not to care whether they do or not. In these circumstances, the results of this latest poll are comparatively encouraging.

Quebec has managed its affairs very intelligently and with an efficiency that other provinces, particularly Ontario and British Columbia, could well emulate. As a result, Quebec is no longer really a below-average per capita income province, and the federalist argument against the secession of Quebec of the withdrawal of large transfer payments will no longer be as persuasive an argument as it has been.

However, because of the cultural revolution in Quebec that secularized the province and so de-emphasized the role of the Roman Catholic church (to which, whatever else it might have done, Quebec owes the preservation of its language, culture, and reasonable standards of health care and social services), the province's birth rate has collapsed. In order to maintain a relevantly sizable percentage of the population of Canada as a whole, Quebec has had to champion immigration from more or less French-speaking people from such places as Lebanon, Morocco, and Haiti. These people, with the rarest exceptions, do not have the slightest interest in Quebec nationalism, and believe that they are becoming residents of a mainly English-speaking continent where they are pleased to find some fellow francophones.

Logically, no sane person would prefer to be unilingual than bilingual. No person of any cultural attainments at all disdains the French language and civilization. While the latest poll numbers are not objectively encouraging to the cause of biculturalism, when examined in context, they justify qualified optimism.

If Quebec, despite the reduction of the economic argument in favour of federalism, recognizes that Canada is indeed a benefit to Quebec, and the pleasures of being a citizen of a G7 country (and one whose federal government has been led by a Quebecer for 45 of the last 56 years) are at least as great as a unilingual country of about 7 million people who would suffer the departure at the dawn of their independence of a large number of skilled Anglophones and bicultural francophones, there would be every reason to believe that English-speaking Canadians outside Quebec could more easily grasp the desirability and value of pursuing some level of bilingualism.

Canada is inching slowly towards some sort of a determination of these issues. It is intolerable for the Quebec government to purport to banish the English language from federal outlets

within the province, such as the post office, and federally chartered corporations, such as the banks. An independent Quebec would be viable, and certainly so would Canada without Quebec. But Quebec will prosper better with no diminution of its influence over the affairs in a renovated version of the present constitutional arrangements, which ensure its great influence within Canada. And Canada is undoubtedly enriched by the presence within it of the second most important French population in the world.

We are close to the time when creative constitutional thinking, such as the program with which Pierre Trudeau defeated the separatists and set them back more than 50 years, and which Brian Mulroney almost brought to fruition with the Meech Lake agreement, could succeed.

Canada is the only transcontinental, bicultural, parliamentary confederation in the history of the world, and as a political system, it has endured longer than the comparable institutions of any other large country, except those of the United Kingdom and the United States. If 83 percent of Quebecers and 43 percent of Canadians outside Quebec approve of bilingualism, it is time to renew the Canadian federal system and to enlist Quebec entirely within it.

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