



BEYOND WORDS



CANADA'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGES NEWSLETTER

WORD FROM THE COMMISSIONER

Beyond words

by *Graham Fraser*

A few weeks ago, I walked from downtown Winnipeg to the banks of the Red River and followed a pedestrian walkway to the Esplanade Riel—the bridge that connects Winnipeg to St. Boniface. On the east side of the river are the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface, the ruins of the cathedral and the tomb of Louis Riel; on the west side, the site for the Canadian Human Rights Museum.

The symbolism is dramatic, with a potential for an eloquence that goes beyond speeches, beyond words. A stone's throw from one of Canada's most important Francophone minority communities will be a museum dedicated to the celebration of human rights. This has enormous potential to tell the story of the struggle for language rights: a narrative that is part of the social fabric of Canada and, in particular, Western Canada, where rights were established, extinguished and then reaffirmed almost a century later.

One of the key instruments in re-affirming and re-establishing those rights has been the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, whose 25th anniversary we celebrate this year. Language rights were at the core of the Charter. One of the legal scholars who led the argument in favour of a charter of rights, F. R. Scott, was a member of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism—the commission whose recommendations led not only to the *Official Languages Act*, but also to the *Multiculturalism Act*.

In 1967, 15 years before the Charter was entrenched in the Constitution, Pierre Trudeau, then Minister of Justice, told the Canadian Bar Association that language rights were, in essence, two-fold: the right to use, and the right to learn. Since the Charter, in 1982, those rights have been defined and clarified, leading to the creation not only of French-language schools across Canada, but French-language school boards. Neither of these achievements were obvious or self-evident; both met with substantial resistance, and both were unthinkable four decades ago.

The debates over the meaning and extent of those rights are far from over; the question of who has the right to send their children to minority language schools is still being argued before the courts. This is confirmation, once again, that rights are not static, but active—and subject to constant review and reassessment.

Similarly, language rights are not simply words on paper: they involve the creation of spaces for cultural expression, educational decision-making and instruction, and personal fulfilment. They go, as the title of this new publication expresses it, beyond words.

A year ago, on October 17, 2006, I succeeded Dyane Adam and became the sixth Commissioner of Official Languages. The first thing I realized was what a strong, devoted and professional team she had left in place. I have constantly been impressed by their commitment and hard work in the defence and promotion of language rights in Canada.

My second realization was that I needed to get a first-hand look at the minority communities across Canada. In my first 12 months, I have visited Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Yellowknife, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Sudbury, Waterloo, Toronto, Embrun, Gatineau, Montréal, Sherbrooke, Québec City, Moncton, Halifax and Charlottetown. (Unfortunately a visit to St. John's had to be postponed because bad weather closed down the airport.) In the course of my travels, I have visited community

centres, old age homes, university campuses, high schools, elementary schools and day-care centres. I have spoken to provincial premiers, ministers and senior officials; I have met university presidents, professors and researchers; I have talked to community activists, health care professionals, teachers, students and volunteers of all sorts.

What struck me most is the extraordinary vitality of minority language communities in Canada—and the differences in the way that vitality is expressed. Some communities show a sense of entrepreneurship, others are more collaborative and co-operative in style, while still others build on their historical roots and sense of identity.

Minority language communities are increasingly culturally diverse, welcoming newcomers to Canada from around the world; more and more, French-speaking Canada is becoming as diverse in origin as English-speaking Canada.

The relationship between linguistic duality and cultural diversity is not always an easy one, and the two concepts are sometimes (in my view mistakenly) viewed as being in conflict. Not only do I believe they are not in contradiction, I think they are complementary. As I noted earlier, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism laid the groundwork for both Canada's language policy and its policy of multiculturalism; the Charter enshrined both in the Constitution.

Making sure that duality and diversity are both respected is not always easy. But doing so makes the Charter a tool that constantly evolves in its interpretation and application. And that respect is essential for the success of the country.