# A LAW FOR NATIONAL UNITY: PIERRE-ELLIOT TRUDEAU'S ATTEMPT TO UNITE CANADA'S TWO SOLITUDES

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Adopted on July 9, 1969, by the Canadian Parliament and proclaimed on September 7 of the same year, the *Official Languages Act* was a response to the growing gap between Quebec and the rest of Canada in the 1960s. But in reality, moving toward unity between the two groups was difficult.

The 1960s were marked in Eastern Canada by a movement of social change, including a redefinition of Quebec identity, which led to the rise of militant nationalism in la Belle Province.

Raymond Hébert, political scientist and author of *La révolution tranquille au Manitoba français*, studied this movement and its repercussions in the rest of Canada:

"In the 1960s, Quebecers wanted to control their destiny. There was a rise in nationalism and sovereignty, including the creation in October 1968 of the Parti Québécois, which advocated for the separation of Quebec from the rest of Canada with its English-speaking majority."

Against this separatism, the Prime Minister of Canada, Lester B. Pearson, and his government established the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, co-chaired by André Laurendeau, publisher of the Quebec newspaper *Le Devoir*, and Davidson Dunton, President of Carleton University in Ottawa.

Hébert explains: "The objective was to conduct an in-depth analysis of the situation of French in Canada and to reflect on what could be done to better develop and promote linguistic duality between Anglophones and Francophones across Canada."

The recommendations of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, published in 1969, led to the *Official Languages Act* of September 1969.

Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, who became Prime Minister of Canada in April 1968, "decided to act quickly," said Hébert, "because nationalism in Quebec was a real threat to Canadian federalism and to the dream of a bilingual country from coast to coast


Photo courtesy of *La Liberté* Magazine

to coast. We had to make the rest of the country attractive to Francophones in Quebec without delay, to show them that they were at home everywhere in Canada, in their own language."

Some 25 years after the passage of the Act, Canadian unity has survived two secession attempts by Quebec: in 1980, the people of Quebec voted No to separation by about 60%; in 1995, the No narrowly won by only 50.58%.

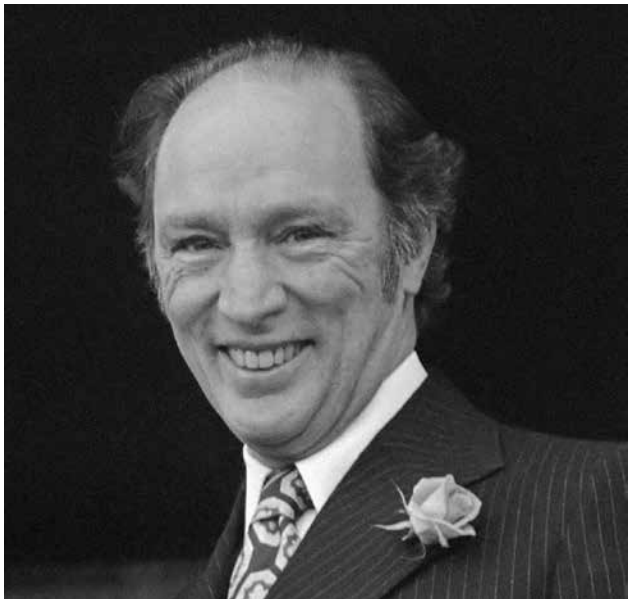
## WHAT DOES THE ACT SAY?

According to Hébert, "the 1969 Act takes a functional, not a community-based approach to bilingualism. It was primarily intended to ensure that the federal public service was bilingual, so that bilingual services could be offered throughout Canada."

In the early 1960s, only 9% of the federal public service was francophone, and French speakers were absent from key positions and from federal offices in Ottawa.

Michel Lagacé was working as an economist for the federal government when the *Official Languages Act* was adopted: "It was a totally anglophone environment. I was the only Francophone and my language was not recognized. French as a language of work was unthinkable."

"When the Act was passed, there was a strong sense of injustice among Anglophones, who were denied access to designated bilingual positions." added Hébert. "There were even some very heated demonstrations by Anglophones who were enraged that French could be considered an official language and that bilingualism was being touted as an essential Canadian value."



Pierre Elliott Trudeau
Courtesy of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

Canada's first Commissioner of Official Languages, Keith Spicer, also remembers a cold welcome from some quarters: "When I arrived to take up my duties in Ottawa in April 1970, I received a warrant for arrest 15 minutes later because I was part of the 'illegal cabal of the *Official Languages Act*'! Similarly, when I had been sent across the country to test the atmosphere before my appointment, I arrived in Calgary and was whistled at and insulted."

He quickly realized that before furthering the cause of official languages, he needed first to promote its acceptance. "The main challenge of my mandate was to dispel mistrust between the various groups and transform a painful debate into a mutually respectful dialogue. There was a lot of prejudice, even racism."

> "I saw mistrust among Anglophones and skepticism among Quebecers. There were also new Canadians who did not understand why there were only two official languages. The atmosphere was toxic."

Born an Anglophone, but completely bilingual, Keith Spicer turned himself into the champion of linguistic duality, explaining its raison d'être to all Canadians.

> **"With my two weapons, laughter and calculated provocation, I spoke to both communities with equal dignity. To forget who was first, who is more numerous. I also made sure to recognize Quebec's unique place in the Canadian Confederation, an absolute prerequisite for achieving Canadian unity. It was a real seduction campaign, involving bridge building and creating a real dialogue."**
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The Commissioner of Official Languages devoted his entire mandate to trying to unify Canadians around the idea of linguistic duality. Certain crises clearly demonstrated the ongoing resistance to the idea, particularly on the part of Anglophones. One such crisis occurred in connection with the introduction of bilingualism in air traffic control in Quebec in the 1970s.

According to Hébert: "This crisis, which lasted about five years, was probably the worst and most symbolic battle of anglophone resistance to bilingualism."

The problem: in the early 1970s, English was the only language allowed in air communications, both commercial and private, throughout Canada, including Quebec.

With the *Official Languages Act*, French-speaking pilots, particularly in Quebec, claimed their right to express themselves in French, a demand categorically rejected by Anglophones.

"The key argument of the Anglophones was the safety of the public and the pilots. They said: If you make French even optional in air communications, it will be very dangerous because our Anglophone pilots will not understand." Hébert said. "Whereas Francophone pilots are in any case obliged to learn English in order to become official pilots."

The crisis was not resolved until the fall of 1979, when Joe Clark's federal government, elected in May 1979, accepted the conclusions of the Commission of Inquiry on Bilingualism in Air Traffic Control Services in Quebec, which unanimously recommended the implementation of bilingualism in air traffic control. In fact, studies showed that it would increase, not compromise, safety. The Commission had begun its work in the fall of 1976.

## MAINLY SYMBOLIC ARGUMENTS

Raymond Hébert continues: "Anglophones have often found rational arguments to resist the use of French, such as security, cost or access to federal employment for unilingual Anglophones. Whether there was any truth at all in these arguments, they originated primarily from the anti-Francophone side of the equation."

Indeed, the experts of the Commission of Inquiry demonstrated the baselessness of the safety argument. As for access to employment, "there was never any question of all federal positions being bilingual. Today, especially in the West, 97% of federal positions are not designated bilingual. Anglophones have therefore always had many job opportunities there."

## ENGLISH TRADITION

If it is difficult to get bilingualism accepted, it is also because, traditionally in the public service, French was banned in favour of English.

"The standards of the Canadian public service were established in the early 20th century by The Ottawa Men: a half-dozen white, English-speaking and Protestant men." said Hebert.

> "They decided that it was imperative that the federal public service function in English. It was forbidden to speak French, or even to send a memo in French. And it was almost impossible for a Francophone to become a minister or deputy minister."

Until the eve of the Laurendeau-Dunton Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Canada, 95% of work at the federal level was still done in English only.

Today, bilingualism in the Canadian public service and the importance of hiring bilingual people in certain designated positions are achievements that no political party would question.

But as Michel Lagacé states, "there is still work to be done. If the department head or minister is Anglophone, too often, everything happens in English. And Francophones still have to fight regularly to get good quality services in French."

Nevertheless, according to Ronald Caza, a lawyer specializing in Francophone minority rights, "the *Official Languages Act* has sent a clear message that in Canada, rather than a majority and a minority, there are in fact two official language communities of equal value, and this at all levels, that must be respected, recognized and served in their language."