



Read the following quotations and discuss the effects of assimilative policies on French language and culture in Canada.

Dear English-Speaking Canada:

"What does Québec want?" Well, as a recent poll clearly indicated, a majority of French-speaking Quebecers wants to remain a part of Canada. But their attachment is conditional: they insist on being recognized as different and respected as such, and they also want to exercise control over the tools which they feel are essential to ensure that their language, culture and institutions can survive in the context of English-speaking Canada and North America.



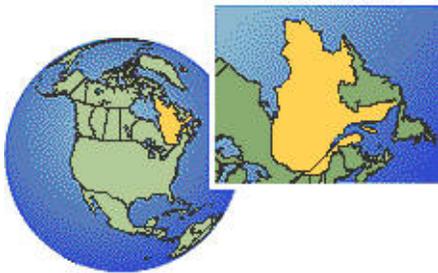
To use a common image, French-speaking Quebecers are barely 6 million in a sea of 275 million English speakers in North America, including about 24 million in Canada. And in spite of the progress that has been made in the last forty years or so, the French language in Québec is still very much under threat. For demographic reasons having to do with the province's low birth rate and immigration, it is perfectly conceivable that francophone Quebecers will eventually become a minority in their province and, eventually, their status might be like that of the Welsh or the Gaels today.

This is not a doomsday scenario or paranoia. It is exactly what has been happening to other francophone communities across the country that are progressively being assimilated.

Indeed, according to a 1993 report by Statistics Canada (based on their 1991 census), the pace of assimilation of Francophones across Canada has quickened. The number of Francophones outside Québec who use English at home jumped from 28.5 per cent to 35.1 per cent between 1981 and 1991. In Ontario, home to about half the country's Francophones outside Québec, 37 per cent of those whose maternal language is French use English at home, up from 29 per cent in 1981... In British Columbia, the rate was a staggering 73 per cent in 1991, compared to 52 per cent ten years before. What will be the status of these francophone communities outside Québec in another ten or fifteen years? Clearly, there is cause for concern.

Some people look at Québec and argue that the French language seems to be doing quite well right now, and they do not see how francophone Quebecers can consider themselves threatened. Well, while it is true that French has progressed in the last forty years or so, demographics show that long-term prospects are actually not so good. With a birth rate of 1.5 child per family, the province's rate is one of the lowest in the industrialized world, not enough to replace the aging francophone population. Since the mid-eighties, the relative weight of the French-speaking majority has been declining, particularly so on the island of Montréal....

~ "Lettre d'un Québécois à ses cousins du reste du Canada," (Letter from a Québecer to his cousins in the rest of Canada): <www.uni.ca/dialoguecanada/lettre.html>



"Above all, Quebecers' fear of assimilation must be recognized and addressed. Those constitutional changes that demonstrably related directly to the protection of the French language and culture in Quebec should be implemented in a spirit of respect and understanding. But those are the only changes to which the Quebec government, on behalf of its people, has a reasonable claim. There is no justification of other transfers of power that do not meet this criterion — transfers that would accomplish nothing but chipping away at national unity and effectiveness and that would ultimately threaten the very survival of Canada. While Canadians in other provinces must understand Quebecers' fear of assimilation, the people of Quebec in turn can reasonably be asked to understand the rest of Canada's fear of dismantling our country by degrees. Quebec is afraid of being assimilated; the rest of Canada is afraid of being devastated.

To reflect the true nature of Canada, it is entirely appropriate that our Constitution formally enshrine the predominantly French-speaking character and cultural uniqueness of Quebec — and, even more important, that it commit our nation as a whole to ensuring that these characteristics will always endure. Not only the government of Quebec, but all of Canada must be the guarantor that Quebecers will not be linguistically or culturally assimilated."

~ The Will of a Nation: Awakening the Canadian Spirit by George Radwanski & Julia Luttrell (Stoddart, 1992).



"Assimilation ...is the complete absorption of a person or group into the culture of another group. The assimilated community replaces its original cultural identity with that of the dominant group."

*~ Roger Bernard, cited by Michael O'Keefe, Francophone Minorities: Assimilation and Community Vitality:
<www.pch.gc.ca/progs/lo-ol/perspectives/english/assimil/defining.htm#Key%20Factors>*

In this context where two languages are official, Canadians find themselves in four different situations:

a) Anglophones outside Quebec are in a triple majority. They are a majority within their province, within their country, and their language dominates the continent. It has a global influence like no other has ever had, not even Latin in Antiquity. They have no need for special linguistic protection.

b) Francophones in Quebec form a clear majority within their province, but find themselves, along with other Francophones, in a minority within Canada, and are, so to speak, no more than a drop in an Anglophone ocean, when considering the proximity of the American giant. They feel the pressure of English, which exerts a strong attraction, particularly among immigrants.

c) Anglophones in Quebec speak the language of the majority in Canada and the continent, but are in a minority within their province, in their day-to-day lives. They also experience different situations depending on where they live, for example, in Montreal, the Eastern Townships or the Gaspé Peninsula.

d) Francophones living outside Quebec are in a triple minority linguistic situation: within their province, within their country and on the continent. This is a condition they all share, above and beyond very real differences of context. For example, Francophones in New Brunswick are alone in forming one third of their province's population, while Francophones in the other provinces make up no more than 5% of the population. Francophones in Manitoba are concentrated geographically in a way that those in Saskatchewan are not. The situation of Francophones in the Ottawa region is different from that of Francophones in Northern Ontario. But these very real differences in no way alter the fact that this triple minority condition of Francophones in all these provinces and territories exposes them to assimilation in the absence of counter-measures.

~ Language rights in Canada: a symmetrical and asymmetrical application, address by the Honourable Stéphane Dion, Symposium on Language Rights, Université de Moncton, New Brunswick (February 15, 2002).

