

Graham Fraser

Keeper of THE FAITH

15 months. That's how long it will have taken to turn a seasoned journalist and writer, a keen political observer east and west of the Ottawa River, into a high-ranking civil servant responsible for maintaining linguistic order in the sometimes nebulous world of bilingualism. A conversation with Graham Fraser, Commissioner of Official Languages, on a visit to Montréal.

By
Jean Décaré

Graham Fraser has great timing. The week he came to meet senior federal management in Quebec, la Belle Province was tackling its umpteenth linguistic psychodrama (an unpublished *Office de la langue française* report was said to indicate the 'minorization' of Francophones on the Island of Montréal). This did nothing to change the former journalist's positive view of the political climate in Quebec. He began on a cautious note by saying: "There seems to be greater commitment for Canadian federation. We're in neither a pre-referendum nor a post-referendum climate."

The Commissioner negotiates the slippery slope of politics with the assurance of experience. And it's a fact: he knows the Quebec situation well. Born in Ottawa, he was Québec Bureau Chief with *The Montreal Gazette* and *The Globe and Mail* and wrote for *Maclean's* magazine. He even had the audacity, for an Anglophone, to write one of the first biographies of the *Parti québécois*.¹ He emerged from his Quebec days with an enviable command of French, which has kept its Anglo-Saxon intonations, a great sensitivity to Quebec culture and, perhaps unbeknownst to him at the time, a book in the making. All he needed was to find the right time to write it.

In 2006, Graham Fraser's name began to circulate around Ottawa when the proofs of his essay on Canada's language policy (*Sorry, I Don't Speak French*) were barely off the press. He was under consideration for appointment as the Commissioner of Official Languages. And yet he had just given his publisher what, to all intents and purposes, was a book on the failure of the country's language policy. "I said to myself: the book will either qualify me or disqualify me." Prime Minister Harper confirmed his nomination as the new ombudsman of Official Languages on September 13, 2006. Mr. Fraser is the sixth person to hold this position since the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (OCOL) was created in 1970.

His new duties awakened him to the more positive aspects of this linguistic duality. "There were gaps in my knowledge, especially where the Francophone minorities outside Quebec were concerned," he said, looking back. No sign of a gap, however, in his knowledge of unilingual Anglophone circles, although he certainly didn't pull any

punches with them. "I wanted to rattle their cage [with his book]. I found that Anglophones in the rest of Canada had a tendency to think the language issue was passé. I'm sorry, but it continues to be a defining element of Canadian identity."

As his functions require, Fraser is once again having to do a balancing act. In passing, he takes the opportunity to debunk popular misconceptions long held in Quebec. "The Anglophone community, which in the past was the dominant community but no longer is, has changed. Following Quebec's transformation, it has become much more bilingual than the Francophone majority. This is a fact Francophones tend to ignore."

Now that he is Commissioner, does he intend to continue "rattling the cage"? After all, most of the 1,000 or so complaints the Office of the Commissioner handles each year are from Francophones. He nodded noncommittally and recalled the role of the OCOL: "There are two components: promotion of both official languages, and their preservation. In the latter role, there is an obligation, explicit in the *Act*, to receive complaints and investigate and report on them with a view to changing institutional behaviour. If linguistic duality is well promoted, there is less need to file complaints and investigate them," he concluded.

The dark side

As we can imagine, he spends more time on the second component of the mandate. In fact, the issue of bilingualism in Canada swings from paradox to contradiction and from misreading to misunderstanding. In theory, eight in ten Canadians say they are favourable to bilingualism in Canada, but in practice, according to the Office of the Commissioner, bilingualism rates in most provinces are below 10%. Quebec heads the list at 40%, followed by New Brunswick (33%) and Ontario (11%). The percentage declines the farther west we go. This may have been what prompted the *National Post* to say in an editorial: "Canada isn't a bilingual country."

There is a very vocal segment of the population that abhors bilingualism and basically sees it as harassment, a pipe dream and an injustice. "A common theme is forcing public servants to speak both languages—even if they live in, say, Moose Jaw," wrote the *Post*.

"If linguistic duality is well promoted, there is less need to file complaints and investigate them."

Graham Fraser reacted strongly to the paper's comments.⁴ First because he condemns such short-sightedness, and also because these same criticisms often tend to have him wearing all hats, mistakenly. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, entrenched in the *Constitution Act, 1982*, specifically guarantees the use of English and French in Parliament and throughout the Government of Canada. Ultimately, the role of the Commissioner of Official Languages does not extend beyond federal institutions. Still, a bilingual public service is a major promotional tool and a powerful incentive. But it's a big step from there to getting Canadians to speak both English and French.

How does the Commissioner intend to promote the use of both official languages within the federal government? He insists that senior officials show leadership in this regard. He explained: "In the past, leadership had a directive meaning. Personally, I don't want to reduce it to an order but rather to a natural incentive. If that comes down to opening a meeting by saying in French: "Merci d'être venus en si grand nombre" and that the rest is in English, then that's not leadership. What I'm talking about here is embodying linguistic duality."

In a way, Fraser embodies that linguistic duality—in spite of himself—alongside Bernard Lord, the former Premier of New Brunswick. In December 2007, the Harper government appointed Mr. Lord as a special advisor on the Action Plan for Official Languages which ends March 31, 2008. The five-year strategy, which projected expenditures of more than \$750 million, was designed to ensure that linguistic duality is recognized as a central component of Canadian identity. The Commissioner feels the need to separate the two roles: "I am accountable to Parliament. I evaluate what the

government does. I target results. The Prime Minister has asked Mr. Lord to make recommendations to him. My responsibility will be to assess the results. It's not the report that's important but what the government will do with it. I'm optimistic about how things will go."

CED Performance Report Card

The Agency will receive its Performance Report Card from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages this spring.

You will remember that CED distinguished itself last year with an overall B rating in the economy portfolio and a special mention for its project Opportunities through Internship, which gave young Quebec Anglophones a chance to work as an intern in entrepreneurship in an English-speaking environment in Montréal.

While we await the official scores, here, for comparison purposes, is a preview of our performance related to the active offer of services to the public based on OCOL findings during the summers of 2007 and 2006.

Direction on making an active offer will be given to all staff shortly and will come into force on April 1, 2008.

The Agency's Performance report card can be consulted at: http://www.ocolclo.gc.ca/html/performance_rendement_e.php

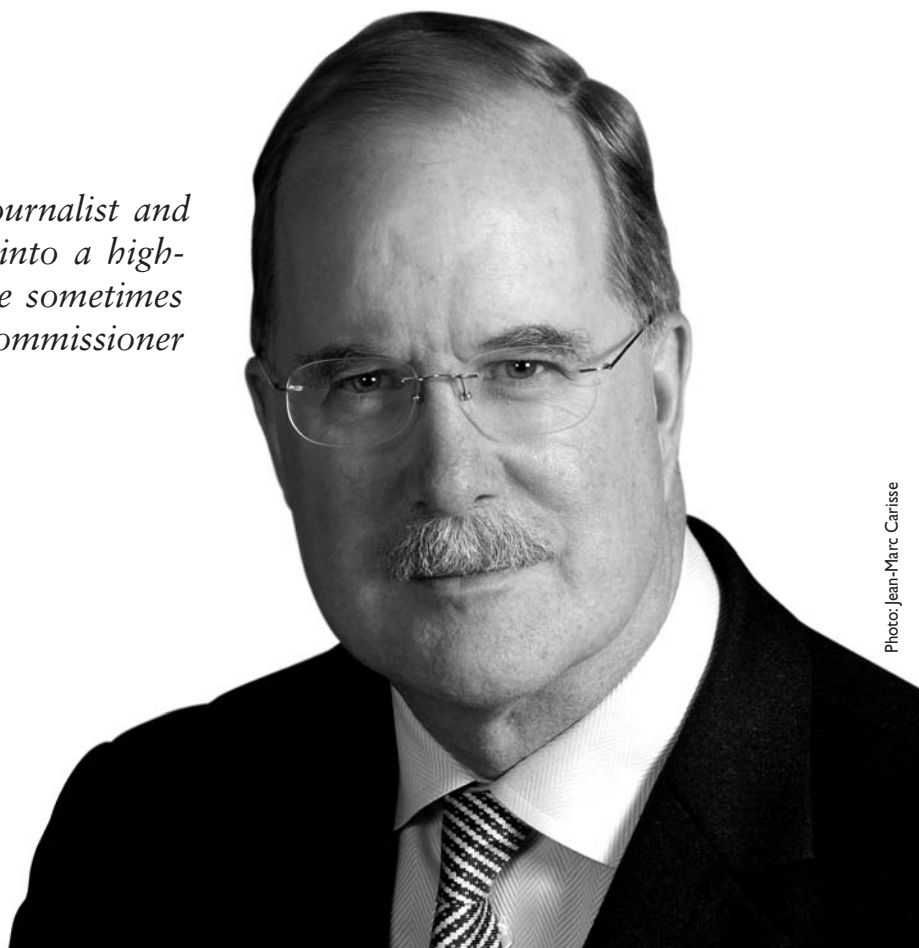


Photo: Jean-Marc Carisse



Jean Décaré interviewing Commissioner Graham Fraser



Actively offer: Clearly indicate visually and verbally that the public can communicate with and obtain services from an office or facility designated bilingual in either English or French.

Greeting the public in both official languages:	Prominently displaying the official languages symbol:
2007: 27.3%	2007: 90.9%
2006: 0%	2006: 84%
In-person services in the language of the minority:	Messages recorded by employees or the automated system are in both official languages:
2007: 90.9%	2007: 85.7%
2006: 92%	2006: 80%
Telephone services in the language of the minority:	
2007: 100%	
2006: 100%	

During the interview, without going into detail, the Commissioner commended the Agency on its soon-to-be-published results. According to OCOL demolinguistic data, over 40% of the Quebec population speaks both official languages (compared with 6.9% for British Columbia). If we exclude CED's efforts in this area, what else might account for its good performance? In other words, is the Department particularly sensitized due to its geographic location? "Yes, that would be logical," the Commissioner acknowledged.

He did mention, almost as an aside, one of the few aspects of CED's evaluation where there was room for improvement: its English-speaking

personnel which, at 2.4% (data from the Position and Classification Information System), falls below the roughly 13% target. "Studies on English-speakers in the Canadian public service in Quebec have also shown that the situation in certain parts of the province was the mirror image of Ottawa," he said. "In the sense that some Anglophones were reluctant to speak English in their day-to-day work."

It should be noted that our Deputy Minister / President, Guy Mc Kenzie, has taken on one of the priorities adopted by the Clerk of the Privy Council, namely, public service renewal. The English universities will be involved in his promotion tours.

Canadian Bilingualism Highlights

Institutional bilingualism as we know it today did not emerge overnight. It is the result of a number of small precedents and the work of a major 360-degree study: *The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* (1963-1971), chaired by André Laurendeau and A. Davidson Dunton. Below are some of the high points along the way from then to now:⁵

- 1927** Postage stamps become bilingual.
- 1934** The federal *Translation Bureau* is established by an Act of Parliament.
- 1936** Bank notes become bilingual.
- 1959** Simultaneous interpretation of the debates in both languages begins in the House of Commons.
- 1969** Following the work of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the first *Official Languages Act* is adopted by Parliament.
- 1974** The *Consumer and Packaging and Labelling Act* comes into force, along with regulations respecting bilingual labelling of consumer products.
- 1982** The *Constitution Act*, 1982, including the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, is proclaimed, containing further constitutional guarantees respecting the status and use of the official languages of Canada in federal institutions.
- 1988** The new *Official Languages Act* is adopted by Parliament. It repeats and qualifies the obligations under the 1982 *Charter* regarding the use of the two official languages in the provision of government services and throughout government institutions.
- 2003** The federal Government announces its Action Plan for Official Languages (2003/04 – 2007/08), which aims to provide a "new momentum for Canada's linguistic duality."
- 2005** The *Official Languages Act* is amended to make enforceable the obligation for federal institutions to take positive measures in order to support the development of official-language minority communities and promote linguistic duality.

Notes:

- 1 Graham Fraser, PQ: René Lévesque and the *Parti québécois* in Power (Montréal, *Libre Expression*, 1984).
- 2 See statistical data at http://www.ocol-clo.gc.ca/html/stats_e.php
- 3 See "Speaking of Waste", *National Post*, February 9, 2008.
- 4 Hugo Fontaine, "Fraser réagit à un éditorial virulent du *National Post*", *La Presse*, February 10, 2008.
- 5 Data obtained from the Canadian Heritage Web site at: http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/lo-ol/biling/hist_e.cfm

Québec celebrates 400 years!

Spotlight on the Plains

As you know, 2008 marks the 400th anniversary of the founding of the City of Québec. Canada Economic Development, Canadian Heritage and Parks Canada are not the only departments and agencies taking part in the festivities. The National Battlefields Commission (NBCC) will also be playing host to numerous activities for visitors to this landmark park, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year.

By
Kaleidoscope

A national historical site

The NBCC first came into being on March 17, 1908, to mark Québec's tricentennial. Battlefields Park was subsequently created to become Canada's very first national urban park. Since that time, the Commission strives to conserve and develop the park.

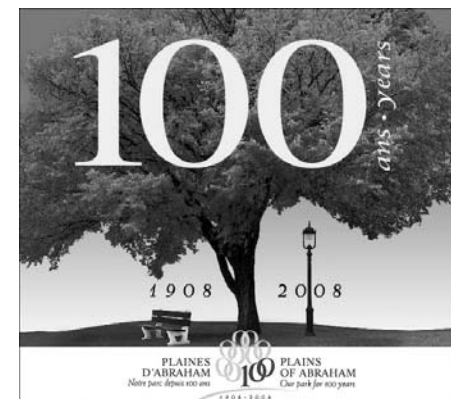
A certain Mr. Martin

The stage of the famous battle of 1759 that changed the course of North American history owes its name to Abraham Martin (1589-1664), who arrived from France with his wife circa 1620. A navigator known as the king's pilot, he knew the river waters well for he had frequently fished there and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In 1635 he was granted land and was one of the first laymen to settle on the heights of Québec, where he grazed his cattle. The name "Plains of Abraham" originates from the people themselves who referred to the Plains by that name.

Bringing people together

The Plains has long been the site of great popular gatherings: during the century after the Conquest, thousands of spectators would congregate there to watch the army's military reviews. Agricultural fairs, outdoor shows and even national ceremonies were also organized on the site.

The festivities surrounding the NBCC's 100 years of existence and the park's creation focus on bringing people together. Throughout 2008, the Plains of Abraham will play host to numerous celebrations worthy of an anniversary that will go down in history.



100 years of history, so many things to see!

The NBCC invites us to its Great Celebration of Nature on May 11. As well, from June 14 to September 1, the 100th anniversary big top will host a multimedia exhibition and a National Film Board documentary, designed specifically to commemorate the anniversary of the Plains. The major attraction of the program is without doubt *Plaines lunes*, an impressive outdoor show highlighting the site's 400 years, starting with the arrival of the first explorers and ending with the park as we know it today.

In June, new monuments will be unveiled to commemorate the legacy of three men who marked the history of the Plains: Abraham Martin, Frederick G. Todd, the landscape architect who designed the layout of the park, and Lord Grey, Governor General at the time of Québec's Tercentary, who influenced the decision to create the park and who was heavily involved in the city's tricentennial celebrations.

Approximately four million people from around the world visit the Plains of Abraham annually. It is one of the world's most prestigious city parks, unique for its sheer size, geographic location, historic role and beauty. Join in the celebrations!

For program details, go to:
www.theplainsofabraham.ca