

SPEECH BY THE COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES FOR NEW BRUNSWICK, KATHERINE D'ENTREMONT

Fifth Annual Meeting of the Language Rights Support Program (LRSP)

Demo-linguistic Evolution and Immigration in Official-Language Communities: Current and
Upcoming courses of Action for Constitutional Language Rights

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Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely pleased to be here with you today to talk about something that I feel strongly about: immigration. This issue is central to the future of our two official language communities across Canada. During this presentation, I will provide an overview of recent changes in Francophone immigration to New Brunswick.

Why be interested in immigration?

As Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick, I have two main roles: the first is to protect the language rights of New Brunswickers. To do this, I conduct investigations into the application of the *Official Languages Act*, and I make recommendations. So, I have a watchdog role.

I will mention in passing that the *Official Languages Act* of New Brunswick applies everywhere in the province, regardless of numbers. Whether you are an Anglophone living on the Acadian Peninsula or a Francophone living in Saint John, you have the right to communicate with and receive services from provincial institutions in your language of choice.

My second role is to promote the advancement of French and English in the province, a role that enables me to take an interest in all factors that ensure the vitality of a language in a given area. In this regard, everyone will agree that immigration plays a central role in the vitality of our two official languages. This is particularly true today, at a time when the population is aging and the birth rate is low.

According to Statistics Canada¹, immigration will soon become almost the only source of population growth in Canada. Our future therefore depends on immigration; however, immigration must benefit both official language communities. That is why, for the past several years, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick has been paying very close attention to this issue.

A unique characteristic

I should point out a unique characteristic of New Brunswick that must be taken into consideration before I go any further.

As you know, according to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, “the English linguistic community and the French linguistic community in New Brunswick have equality of status and equal rights and privileges.” Owing to this constitutional equality of status, the governments of New Brunswick and Canada have, in my opinion, an obligation to ensure that their immigration policies and practices benefit both communities equally. Is this actually happening?

One study, surprising conclusions

In 2010, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick carried out a study of the Population Growth Secretariat, which was, at the time, the government body responsible for immigration to the province. That study resulted in two clear findings:

First, the Secretariat had no official policy or guidelines for ensuring that each linguistic community benefited equally from immigration to the province. In 2010-2011, about 11% of the nominees chosen under the New Brunswick Provincial Nominee Program – a program under which the Government of New Brunswick can choose candidates for immigration to the province – spoke French. (The Francophone community of New Brunswick makes up about one-third of the province’s total population.) Also, we noted that the provincial government did not have a strategy, an action plan, or even any targets for Francophone immigration.

Those two findings led to two recommendations.

First, the then Commissioner asked the provincial government to develop an official policy and clear guidelines to ensure that both linguistic communities benefited equally from immigration. Then, he recommended that a Francophone immigration strategy be adopted.

2011 Census – new data

Data from the 2011 Census confirm once again that the Francophone community of New Brunswick does not benefit from immigration as much as the province’s Anglophone community.

An analysis done by the Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities², using data from the last census, shows that, in 2011, the vast majority of recent immigrants to New Brunswick, or 81.1%, had English as their first official language spoken, whereas only 11.7% had French. In addition, only 7.7% of recent immigrants declared French as their mother tongue, compared with nearly 29% who declared English.

The results of the New Brunswick Provincial Nominee Program are not much brighter. In 2012-2013, the percentage of French-speaking and bilingual (English and French) nominees was only 12.2% of all nominees welcomed to the province.

Efforts have been made, but much remains to be done

Of course, it must be recognized that Francophone immigration is a multi-faceted challenge. Indeed, it is not simply a matter of recruiting French-speaking immigrants, which is itself a lengthy task; we have to be able to retain them and help them integrate into the Francophone community. In this regard, it must be recognized that efforts have been made by both levels of government to meet the challenge of Francophone immigration.

In 2009, the federal government made a commitment to pay to the Province of New Brunswick a sum of \$10 million over the course of five years in order to “preserve the population’s linguistic profile with respect to immigrant recruitment.” That financial support ended in March 2014. No renewal of that \$10 million has yet been announced.

Despite significant effort and some successes, it must be said that the recent investments have not been sufficient to correct the existing imbalance that compromises the demographic weight of the Francophone community of New Brunswick in the long term.

A framework agreement

That is why I believe a federal-provincial framework agreement on Francophone immigration to New Brunswick must be put in place. This would entail a long-term collaborative approach between the two levels of government to promote Francophone immigration to the province.

First and foremost, this agreement would affirm New Brunswick’s unique linguistic status and recognize that immigration programs and practices of both levels of government must absolutely maintain the demographic weight represented by the two official linguistic communities. It would also affirm the duty to compensate for past imbalances in immigration rates.

This agreement would build on federal and provincial resources in order to create a strong synergy of action. It would support the work of community stakeholders, such as the Réseau provincial en immigration francophone.

Furthermore, the framework agreement would contain a series of measures adapted to the socioeconomic context and needs of the Francophone community of New Brunswick. Special attention would be paid to the needs of Francophone and bilingual businesses.

Finally, the agreement would provide long-term funding for the recruitment, settlement, and retention of Francophone immigrants as well as establish an evaluation framework to measure progress.

The provincial government reacts

Last July, the provincial government released the *Population Growth Strategy* and the *Francophone Immigration Action Plan*. With this initiative, the New Brunswick government was finally acting on the two recommendations made by my predecessor, i.e., a clear commitment to maintaining the linguistic composition of our province and the adoption of a strategy for doing so. In my view, this is an ideal opportunity to establish this new collaboration, this framework agreement, between the two levels of government.

A national priority

Over the past few years, Francophone immigration has been a topic of interest to the federal and provincial governments. It must now become a national priority, as it affects the very future of official language minority communities. For this to happen, we must now come up with the means to success.

That is why, on October 30, my colleagues, Graham Fraser and François Boileau, and I asked the different levels of government to step up their efforts to increase Francophone immigration outside Quebec.

In that regard, it is troubling to see that the *Strategic Plan to Foster Immigration to Francophone Minority Communities*, which ended in March 2013, has not been renewed. Where is the new strategy? We are referred to the *Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages*. This argument seems a bit weak to me.

I read with great interest the *2014 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration*, a very edifying document. It even contains a gender-based comparative analysis across the policy, program, and research sectors of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. However, an analysis of the results of Francophone immigration outside Quebec is conspicuous by its absence.

At meetings, New Brunswick civil servants responsible for immigration have boasted more than once about the defunct Francophone Significant Benefit program. It was one of the main tools they used to recruit Francophone immigrants to our province. It disappeared a few months ago to the consternation of everyone concerned with Francophone immigration.

The new *Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality (2013-2018)* provides an investment of \$29.5 million over five years for immigration to official language minority communities across the country, including \$4 million for New Brunswick.

Is this enough given the results that have been achieved so far? Is this enough for such a fundamental issue? Because the issue here is linguistic duality, which defines us as a nation.

Through immigration laws, policies, and practices, governments have a direct impact on the future, vitality, and even the survival of official language communities. And this is fraught with consequences.

The time has come for Francophone immigration to become a true national priority.

Thank you.

1 *L'immigration francophone dans les Provinces de l'Atlantique : évolution récente et perspectives d'avenir*, presentation by Brigitte Chavez of Statistics Canada as part of the 3^e Colloque atlantique sur l'immigration francophone – L'immigration économique des immigrants, une force en Acadie, Edmundston, February 4, 2014

2 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick, 2012-2013 Annual Report, page 27