



Embrace Diversity:

B R I E F

*On the reasonable accommodation concerns
of the English-speaking Minority Community
in the Eastern Townships*

PRESENTED TO THE:
SPECIAL COMMITTEE DEALING WITH
PRACTICAL ACCOMMODATION IN
RELATION TO DIFFERENT CULTURES

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November 2007

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Who We Are

Townshippers' Association is a non-partisan, non-profit, volunteer-led community organization serving the English-speaking community in the Eastern Townships. This covers a territory larger than Belgium and includes the Estrie administrative region as well as parts of Montérégie, Mauricie-Centre-du-Quebec and Chaudière-Appalaches.

Our Population

The total population of the Eastern Townships is about 630,000, and about 41,000 (6% of the population) are English speakers. These include persons whose mother tongue is English, as well as immigrants who learned English before they learned French.

The Eastern Townships English-speaking minority is marked by a disproportionately high number of older people and a “missing middle” of people aged 15 to 44, resulting from a high proportion of youth leaving the. Not only is this generation proportionally lower in numbers, its members also have, on average, lower levels of education, employment and income than their French-speaking counterparts or their English-speaking seniors region (Floch & Warnke, 2004; Klimp, 2006).

This minority population is dispersed, which impacts its ability to connect and form a sense of community. Nevertheless, a linguistic minority community survives in the Eastern Townships due in part to its tenacity and determination not to fade away, and due in part to the support and encouragement of the French-speaking majority in the region.

Together, the English- and French-speaking communities in the Eastern Townships are a true showcase of successful duality – two languages, two complementary cultures – who live side by side and co-exist in harmony. Indeed, our educational and health institutions reflect this spirit of respect and collaboration now more than ever. Is this an “accommodation” on the part of Francophone majority? Is the majority community simply “tolerating” a minority? We think not. We advocate that embracing cultural and linguistic diversity is the key to the successful future of Quebec society. Embracing diversity has worked here and can work elsewhere.

Embrace Diversity

Throughout the course of this commission's forums, many people have spoken of tolerance, and the need to tolerate the differences we see between traditional Quebecers and new Quebecers. The fact of the matter is, the “Quebecois de souche” or Quebec-born citizens and their immigrant friends have more in common than not. We forget sometimes that this is true in terms of values, but also in terms of roots. Whether

we go back 10 years or 200 years, everyone in Quebec who is not aboriginal has roots in another part of the world.

However, while one might tolerate poor behaviour from their children or tolerate increases in gas prices, the notion of tolerance as a method of addressing new ideas and new approaches from newcomers to Quebec is a disturbingly simplistic and divisive notion. On the contrary, we would like to see the *embracing of diversity* become a core value in Quebec society. Welcoming new citizens to Quebec and helping them become full and active contributors to Quebec's socio-economic vitality is crucial. It is essential in creating a socially and economically stable future for Quebec, and it is essential in demonstrating to the world the nature of our free and open, democratic and pluralistic society.

History Helps

The history of the English-speaking community in the Eastern Townships is one based on immigration. It includes Empire Loyalists heading north to Canada from America over 150 years ago. To this day, it is a community that looks outward by inviting people to settle in the Townships, most often reaching out to a diaspora of ex-Townshippers who have left and now want to return, either for a better quality of life or for retirement.

While the English-speaking community of Montreal might still have the critical mass and geographical concentration needed to enable it to help integrate immigrants into Quebec society, these elements have been lacking for several decades in most areas of the Eastern Townships English-speaking community. Nevertheless, the "civil society" of this English-speaking community has been historically open to newcomers, including civic organizations, associations, religious communities, political organizations, and health and educational institutions.

The "Reason" behind "Reasonable Accommodation"

A widely held view is that the long-term demographic fundamentals of Quebec society are weak. As with most post-industrial societies in the Western world which have low fertility rates incapable of sustaining the natural replacement rate for its population, Quebec needs immigration to strengthen its socio-economic future. Therefore, ensuring a smooth and expeditious integration of new Quebecers into the social and economic fabric of Quebec is crucial. Many will agree that, collectively, we do not have a choice – the standard of living Quebecers enjoy today is predicated on a labour force that simply cannot be maintained without high levels of immigration.

Regardless, it needs to be understood that *accommodation* is not so much about tolerance as it is about respect. This includes a profound respect of diversity. It is not simply about an ethnic culinary experience; rather it's about allowing new Quebecers the same freedoms that Quebec-born citizens enjoy. The fundamental underpinnings of this belief resonate clearly through Quebec's Bill of Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights & Freedoms.

While we should not accept from immigrants behaviour or conduct that we would not accept from Quebec-born citizens, neither should we be unfairly demanding. In the end, a *Quebecois de souche* or a *neo-Quebecois* have equal rights and freedoms, as citizens, insofar as they do not trample on others' rights and freedoms.

Of Minorities and Majorities

It is often mentioned that the language of the 7 million French-speaking Quebecers is threatened by the all-encompassing English-speaking majority represented by some 300 million people in North America. The fact that a modest English-speaking minority exists within this French-speaking minority is easily forgotten.

As a minority within a minority, the Quebec English-speaking community has a unique role to play in helping immigrants understand Quebec society and consequently become active and engaged contributors to Quebec's socio-economic vitality. The shared experience of living as a minority in this increasingly pluralistic society is a bridge that can foster cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

An Open Door is an Open Mind

Seeing immigration as an issue of accommodating other cultural customs, rather than of enhancing, diversifying and modernising the Quebec experience, leads to manifold dangers. The extent to which Quebec society makes newcomers feel at home is a direct reflection of the extent to which Quebec society is willing to express its democratic values. Indeed, the true test of a democracy – as Quebec purports to be - is its fundamental willingness and ability to protect and nurture minorities. This protection should be extended to all minorities, not just the ones which are convenient or politically strategic.

An insular society risks its own demise by closing its mind, and thus its doors, to the rest of the world. Quebec can no more afford insular policies or anti-immigrant sentiments than it can afford not to face the grim reality of demographics. Socio-economic, cultural and demographic vitality all depend on attitudes and policies that embrace diversity.

A Unique Opportunity

Francophone Quebecers are a minority in Canada and North America. This fact gives them a unique perspective on minority rights and freedoms, as well as the need to protect and nurture their minority society. If Quebec exerts the same passion and conviction to protect minorities within its own jurisdiction as it does to protect the Francophone Quebec minority within the North American context, the future is promising for successful integration of immigrants.

Francophone Quebecers have a unique opportunity to show generosity to other cultures and languages, and consequently, act as an example – as international leaders – of

compassion and openness for minorities and majorities in other parts of the world. This is Quebec's chance to demonstrate the value of an open door and open mind; to collaborate and integrate peaceful and hard-working contributors to society regardless of their country of origin, skin colour, language or religion.

Recommendations

1. Townshippers' Association recommends that the government review all aspects of its immigration welcoming programs in order that it remove all traces of a "one size fits all" approach to the management of diversity.
2. Townshippers' Association urges the Quebec government to empower communities and local or regional bodies interested in the issue of immigrant reception to develop policies best suited to local historical experience and demographic circumstances, always ensuring that these approaches do not contravene the respective provisions of the Quebec and Canadian charters of rights and freedoms, and the various legal assurances of the primacy of the French language. In this context, Townshippers' Association calls for much greater participation from English-speaking Quebecers into the development of models aimed at managing diversity in the province.
3. Townshippers' Association encourages the Quebec government to ensure the inclusion of English-speaking youth in intercultural exchange and dialogue. Programs aimed at intercultural harmony cannot neglect the English-speaking minority population in all its diversity.
4. Townshippers' Association urges the Quebec government to strengthen its initiative to address the current under-representation of language and cultural minorities in its public service. A government is needed that reflects the diversity of the society it serves, and by thus embracing diversity, models this important cultural development for all Quebec citizens.

References

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- Klimp, K. (2006). *Profile of the English-speaking Community in the Eastern Townships*. Sherbrooke, QC: Townshippers' Association.