

Mémoire présenté à la commission Bouchard-Taylor
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Une longue histoire de diversité au Québec: l'exemple du patrimoine anglophone
A long history of diversity in Quebec: the example of Anglophone heritage

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Comme historien professionnel, j'aimerais souligner l'importance d'une compréhension plus large de l'histoire. Je suis aussi président du Réseau de patrimoine anglophone du Québec (Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network: « le QAHN »), que je représente avec l'appui de mon conseil d'administration qui m'avait demandé de préparer un mémoire pour présenter à la commission. On a décidé de soumettre le mémoire en anglais avec quelques mots d'introduction en français, et de faire la présentation publique entièrement en français.

Le QAHN est un réseau d'organismes et d'individus qui s'intéressent à l'histoire et au patrimoine des gens du Québec d'expression anglaise – c'est à dire, les gens dont la langue maternelle est l'anglais, ou qui parlent l'anglais chez eux – qui ont laissé, et qui continuent de laisser, des traces sur le paysage naturel, culturel, et social du Québec. Parmi les membres du réseau se trouvent des sociétés d'histoire, des musées, des archives, des professeurs et des écrivains dont le travail, en général ou en partie, concerne l'histoire des anglophones au Québec. Le QAHN est un organisme impartial sans but lucratif. Le réseau attire des anglophones, des francophones, et des gens d'autres groupes linguistiques et ethniques qui ont décidé de demeurer au Québec. Il encourage une connaissance plus ample du patrimoine Anglophone au Québec en croyant que ce patrimoine forme un élément essentiel de la société québécoise.

Why does QAHN feel it appropriate to submit a brief to the Bouchard-Taylor Commission?

It is QAHN's view that the commission's work comes at a critical juncture in the history of Quebec, forty years after the Quiet Revolution, when the Francophone majority is able to assess its sense of identity, not only in linguistic terms but in cultural and social terms as well. An understanding of the experience of English speakers will, we believe, prove crucial as Quebec grapples with the approaches it should take in order to continue flourishing within the liberal democratic tradition. In recent months, much of the public discourse surrounding "reasonable accommodation" might suggest that there

is a widely-held view that Quebec's identity is rooted in the cultural, religious, and linguistic tradition of one group, and that all others constitute "les autres." The experience of Quebec's English speakers points to a much greater diversity within the province's history than this somewhat narrow view would suggest. It is true that this experience largely involved adopting the English language and not the language of the province's majority. This is historical fact, however, and should have no bearing on the acceptance of French as the predominant language of Quebec today. I would argue that the matter of "reasonable accommodation" is not substantially different in Quebec than it is elsewhere, other than that it takes place largely in French. What is at stake is not the heritage of one ethnic group, but rather values which Quebec holds in common with much of the modern world.

What do we mean by the history of the English-speaking community?

Let us begin with the people who came from the British Isles, either directly or by way of other parts of North America. The British presence in Quebec goes back nearly 250 years: initially in the form of a conquering army but also very soon in the form of a varied population intent on settling what they, like most Europeans, perceived as unoccupied terrain – what early maps referred to as "waste land." This population consisted of "the English," native speakers of the English language who for the most part were Protestant, although of many differing and often mutually hostile denominations. It also consisted of Scots, another recently conquered people many of whom saw the English language and assimilation with Englishness as a means of social advancement, or in some cases survival; other Scots retained the Gaelic language well into the 19th century. Most Scots were Protestant (mainly Presbyterian) but a fair number were Catholic. Many Protestant Scots and some English hailed from Ireland, especially the northern part known as Ulster; these people counted among the first settlers in British North America, but they were soon joined by large numbers of Catholic Irish, many of whom adopted English there as working language. Other groups from the British Isles, considered ethnically distinct at home, such as the Welsh and Cornish, found themselves lumped in with the English in the new world. Finally, a small but significant number of British immigrants were Jewish, originally Sephardim from Spain by way of northern Europe, all fairly anglicized by the early 19th century.

A final category of British immigrant to Quebec were the Americans, people of English, Scottish, Irish, and Jewish background who had been living in the colonies for several generations before relocating north of the border that was established in 1783. Some of these people were Loyalists, others were what we call "late Loyalists," meaning that their loyalties may well have been to the British Empire but more importantly were to the business of making a living.

Of the American immigrants let us note two additional groups whose numbers contributed significantly to Quebec's English speakers. First, those of African or Caribbean origin, who were for the most part former slaves from the English-speaking colonies. The second group constitutes people – Protestant, Catholic and Jewish – from Germanic, Central-European countries who had been anglicized for many generations before settling in Lower Canada.

People from the British Isles and the United States settled in almost all parts of Lower Canada: in Montreal and Quebec, in the newly-created townships near the American border and above the Ottawa River, in the rugged country amid the Megantic hills and the Laurentians, along the Gaspesian shores, and here and there up and down the St Lawrence River on old seigneurial land. In the cities and near the border, many people of British origin took advantage of trading links across North America and within the British Empire to create commercial enterprises which gave them a social and political advantage over their French-speaking counterparts. At the same time, rural poverty knew no linguistic barriers, and with urban industrialization a working class emerged that was largely English-speaking, above all Irish Catholic, at least until the great migrations of Francophones into the cities towards the end of the century.

By that time, a similar migration of peoples from much further away was beginning; by the end of the century the population of Montreal and a few other cities had expanded significantly. Many of these immigrants, such as the Irish Catholics, had English as a working language; others from southern and eastern Europe opted to learn English as part of their acculturation into North America, perceiving it to be the principal language of business across the continent. Accordingly, Irish and Italian immigrants sent their children to English sections established by the Catholic, and otherwise Francophone, school commissions, while the wave of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe made arrangements with the Protestant school boards, often clashing with their more anglicized and longer-established co-religionists over the degree to which assimilation was a good idea.

Contrary to the received idea that there were always “two solitudes” in Quebec, people have shown a striking willingness to intermarry, thereby blurring efforts to distinguish sharply between linguistic communities, let alone ethnic ones. To a large extent, people we consider Anglophone married into and assimilated with Francophone families: statistically, some 40% of Quebec Francophones have some Irish or Scots ancestry. In this sense, the contribution of “the English” to Quebec society has been very direct. More recently, the numbers of endogamous families, many of them fundamentally bilingual, makes it even harder to put people, especially children, in “appropriate” boxes.

Since World War Two a much larger wave of immigrants reached Quebec, many of them from parts of the world where English was a common language, including India,

the Middle East, South-East Asia, parts of Africa, and the Caribbean. Others came from Central and Eastern Europe, China, and South America; again, the choice for a second language, a language of adoption, tended to be English, and schools accommodated – not always easily or willingly, but in the end successfully.

Among the great variety of First Nations within the borders of Quebec are a number whose most comfortable language is English despite recent efforts to reconnect with traditional tongues. The Mohawk have especially strong links with the English-speaking border regions and the Montreal suburbs, and the Cree have historic connections with Protestant missionaries and the North West Territories.

This identification of the English language with social and economic advancement has been one of the principal challenges facing Quebec's linguistic majority in its effort to make French the standard public language of Quebec. (I say "standard public" rather than "official" as it has been a comparatively easy matter to make French the official language of Quebec but a far more difficult matter to make it functionally universal.) While recognizing the presence of an English-speaking minority and guaranteeing it certain specific rights, the Quebec state has encouraged newcomers to the province to embrace the culture and language of the majority; instead of virtually ignoring the French language as most immigrants did until a few decades ago, newcomers must now recognize that they have chosen to live in a place that is quite distinct from the rest of North America, linguistically speaking. Generations of Quebec Anglophones also lived without making contact with the Francophone majority or even in some cases being aware of it. Some Anglophones lament the changes of recent decades, but I think I am right in suggesting that most people within Quebec's Anglophone community have also understood and accepted their province's distinct character and acknowledge French as its standard public language.

But that is the reality of the present and I assume the future; my concern as a historian is for the past. As we in Quebec explore questions of identity, we need to look to the past and understand our history in order to make sense of who we are now. Obviously, the history of Quebec is not one of a single linguistic and ethnic group; rather, it is a history with an astonishing variety of peoples and stories. Crucial to this history were the English-speaking communities who settled across Quebec and whose descendants still live in every corner of the province, from Rouyn-Noranda to Blanc-Sablon, from the Pontiac to the Gaspé, from Sherbrooke to Saguenay. Equally crucial are the peoples who opted to learn English as a second language and eventually adopt it as their own, starting with the Scots and Irish settlers and continuing with the Italians and Eastern European Jews to countless newcomers since. Their traditional preference for the English language, whatever the reason, is an indelible fact in Quebec history, and one that has substantially shaped today's society.

It is my hope that, as we continue to write our collective history, we do not reduce this rich and diverse experience to a token chapter on “les anglais.” As we come to realize that our society is culturally diverse, so too must we acknowledge how diverse our history is. If a large part of that diversity chose to express itself in English, that does not take away from the fact that people have been settling in Quebec, and adapting reasonably well, for centuries. All of that history has shaped the way we are today. The challenge ahead is how best to flourish as a modern democratic society, one which happens to be primarily French-speaking, while continuing to absorb people from a wide variety of cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds.