

“Committed to Linguistic Plurality”: Negotiating language policy and diversity in Canada’s public service – Perspectives past and present¹

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How has the relationship between language and diversity policies been perceived and negotiated at the heart of the Canadian state—among non-partisan actors within the federal apparatus? What have some of the most senior officials involved, such as the Commissioners of Official Languages, had to say over the decades? What about the ultimate arbiters of our laws and the values of our time, the judges of the Supreme Court of Canada? And what about ordinary federal public servants? Last, but not least, what does the general public think—those whom, after all, the federal government is meant to serve—including Canadians who are themselves of a diverse background?

For some, the official bilingualism and multiculturalism policies are difficult to reconcile. For others, and in particular the Commissioner of Official Languages, the independent agent of parliament whose role is to protect language rights and promote both official languages within our increasingly diverse society, official bilingualism and multiculturalism go hand in hand and are complementary. As discussed in the sections that follow, other key players in the federal apparatus share this perspective, as do many other Canadians.

I. Thinking things through: What Commissioners past and present have said about multiculturalism and official bilingualism

For decades, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages has maintained that the two policies—multiculturalism and official bilingualism—share the same objective: to combat all varieties of prejudice against minorities in order to promote a greater spirit of tolerance in Canadian society and, ultimately, to strengthen social cohesion.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages to the research contained in this article, notably Sarah Affany and Clarence Lemay, as well as other colleagues who provided constructive feedback.

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Figure 1. Max Yalden, Commissioner of Official Languages (1977–1984). Source: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

As explained by the second Commissioner of Official Languages, Max Yalden (1977–1984), whose words prompted the title of this article:

[A] nation that goes to the trouble to recognize two or more languages is implicitly committed to linguistic plurality. Far from excluding the use of other languages, recognition of official languages for government purposes is a signal to everyone of the importance to be attached to linguistic traditions and resources. . . . The two official languages are standard-bearers for linguistic freedoms in Canada—not simply an acknowledgement of our past, but an affirmation about our future.²

Reflecting at the end of his own decade of service (2006–2016), Commissioner Graham Fraser remarked that the question he received most often was “How does Canada’s language policy mesh with multiculturalism?”³ Explaining the relationship between multiculturalism and official bilingualism hasn’t exactly been easy for the Office of the Commissioner. “One of the Office’s most thankless tasks,” wrote Commissioner Yalden in the French version of his 1979 annual report, “is often having to persuade people that recognizing two official languages, whether federally or at another level, is not discriminatory toward cultures rooted in other languages. All too often we find ourselves having to walk a tightrope. [translation]”⁴ Canada’s first Commissioner of Official Languages, Keith Spicer (1970–1977), never lacking for frankness, had expressed his own frustration at fellow Anglophones from outside Quebec punching down on the Francophone minority communities in their midst, in the name of diversity:

² Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1979*, p. 28.

³ Cited in Raymond Théberge, “Let’s be honest about multiculturalism and official bilingualism: Perspectives from the Commissioner of Official Languages”, in *Multiculturalism @50 and the Promise of a Just Society*, Canadian Issues, Association for Canadian Studies, Fall/Winter 2021, p. 21.

⁴ Commissioner of Official Languages, *Rapport annuel 1979*, p. 29.

[T]heir English-speaking neighbours tend to ignore them, tell them to assimilate, or warn them at least not to ask more than “other” local ethnic groups. Usually the same English-speakers who most loudly denounce [French-language legislation] in Quebec have [also] been leading the fight for years against free choice of decent French schools and against taxpaid services in French.⁵

In October 2021, on the 50th anniversary of Canada’s multiculturalism policy, current Commissioner Raymond Th  berge echoed the words of his predecessors when he voiced his own concerns about the disingenuous, zero-sum “whataboutisms” that we sometimes hear in the public discourse:

All too often, we hear the assertion that rolling back French-language rights will somehow bestow greater privileges upon other languages. . . . [Let’s be honest], targeting Canada’s largest linguistic minority (by far the largest in Canada as a whole *and* in Canada outside Quebec, by the way) should come as little reassurance to other minorities aspiring to advance their rights.⁶

It begs the question: If Canada only had one official language, would we be talking quite as much about the need to promote others?

The Office of the Commissioner had begun to seriously examine the question in the late 1970s and early 1980s, around the time multiculturalism and official languages rights were being entrenched in the Constitution. Then, as now, its view, as expressed by Commissioner Yalden in his 1980 annual report, was that the two policies are not only mutually reinforcing, but also politically necessary:

The principles of equality and justice which are the essential underpinnings of the *Official Languages Act* are in no way incompatible with encouraging respect for other languages. On the contrary, in our view, their preservation can only enrich the soil of linguistic tolerance and help to alleviate traditionally strained relations between English and French.⁷

The Office of the Commissioner recognized that the two policies have been plagued by misunderstanding. For Ethno-Cultural minorities, explained Commissioner Yalden, “What does stir resentment—and understandably so—is any implication that only English and French have an intrinsic value or cultural or economic *raison d’  tre*.”⁸ They, too, wanted to be valued—to feel *seen*—by the broader society. According to Yalden, “[it] no doubt has to do not only with the value which they attach to their language but also with their perception of its usefulness and acceptability in the new country.”⁹ Conversely, official language minority communities sought reassurance that multiculturalism’s celebration of other languages would not be invoked by anti-bilingualism advocates (per the Keith Spicer comment, above) to diminish their own language rights.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Anglophone majority outside Quebec and the Francophone majority in Quebec wanted reassurance that multiculturalism would not lead to “social fragmentation.” If left unchecked, Yalden warned, such doubts could transform into open

⁵ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Sixth Annual Report – 1976*, p. 6.

⁶ Raymond Th  berge, “Let’s be honest about multiculturalism and official bilingualism: Perspectives from the Commissioner of Official Languages”, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁷ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1980*, p. 27.

⁸ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1980*, p. 27.

⁹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1982*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1985*, p. 22.

discrimination against Ethno-Cultural groups *and* official language minorities alike: a “morbid hostility toward anything different.”¹¹

II. Walking the talk: Efforts by the Office of the Commissioner to leverage official bilingualism in favour of multiculturalism, and vice versa

What was truly needed in the view of the Office of the Commissioner was greater collaboration between official language minority communities and other groups to show how multiculturalism and official bilingualism could be mutually reinforcing and help to strengthen social cohesion. As Yalden explained in 1984 in his final annual report:

Bilingualism and multiculturalism are equally vital for Canada’s social cohesion and cultural enrichment; no effort should be spared to bring out their individual importance and complementarity. Pleased as we are with government efforts to explain the importance of official bilingualism to ethnic groups, we think it is increasingly important to bring these groups and the official language minorities together.¹²

Early examples cited by the Office of the Commissioner included Franco-Ontarian and Ethno-Cultural organizations supporting each other’s efforts for educational autonomy and heritage language instruction, and Ethno-Cultural organizations working with the Franco-Manitoban community to combat discrimination. All minority groups, and indeed all Canadians, explained Commissioner Yalden, had an interest in combatting prejudice: “[M]ore and more Canadians recognize the real enemy as that which turns cultural and linguistic diversity into a simplistic bogey—a threat to jobs, to educational standards, to the neighbourhood.”¹³

For Commissioner Yalden, writing in 1981 on the eve of constitutional patriation, it wasn’t just a question of combatting discrimination and encouraging a greater spirit of tolerance in the present. It was also a question of addressing the wrongs of the past:

We are beginning to see that such an approach was not only patronizing but improvident. The situation of our native languages is very much a case in point. No other languages are either so authentically and aboriginally Canadian and yet their place in national language politics is anything but clear and their condition anything but reassuring.¹⁴

In the subsequent years under commissioners Yalden and D’Iberville Fortier (1984–1991), the Office of the Commissioner called for measures that it hoped would advance multiculturalism and diversity within a bilingual framework, including:

- teaching heritage languages in schools, notably Indigenous languages;
- better English- and French-language instruction for immigrants, to facilitate integration; and

¹¹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1983*, p. 24.

¹² Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1984*, p. 34.

¹³ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1983*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1981*, p. 34.

- a more positive acknowledgement in the *Official Languages Act* itself of languages other than English and French, a gesture that was apparently welcomed by leaders of diverse communities at the time.¹⁵

In more recent decades, commissioners Dyane Adam (1999–2006) and Graham Fraser (2006–2016) raised awareness of the diverse and multiple identities within official language minority communities and of the need to leverage immigration to ensure the continued demographic vitality of Francophone communities not just in Quebec but across the country. This, Adam and Fraser insisted, would require greater immigration not only from French-speaking parts of Europe, but also from Africa—home to the world’s largest Francophone populations—and from elsewhere around the globe. Indeed, a long-standing policy priority of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada has been to raise awareness of Francophone minority communities’ diversity and to encourage more immigration. In the fall of 2021, Commissioner Théberge also highlighted the need for greater immigration from the international Francophonie in his study on the federal government’s 4.4% Francophone immigration target.¹⁶



Figure 2. Two studies from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages on immigration, diversity and official languages.

¹⁵ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1983*, p. 23; Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Annual Report 1985*, p. 22.

¹⁶ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, [Statistical analysis of the 4.4% immigration target for French-speaking immigrants in Francophone minority communities. Almost 20 years after setting the target, it is time to do more and do better](#), Final report, 2021, 80 p.

From 2007 to 2012, the Office of the Commissioner held consultations on diversity in Toronto, Vancouver, Halifax and Montreal. “Canada’s multiculturalism and language policies,” explained Commissioner Fraser, “both stem from our belief that all citizens are equal and that we must ensure that they can retain their identities, take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging.”¹⁷ According to the summary report, published in 2014, participants expressed a variety of opinions, but what brought them together was a shared conviction that diversity and official languages can go hand-in-hand: “[T]he input received from the discussion forums was both positive and negative. . . . [But] no matter where the forum was held, participants showed a strong appreciation for the ideal of linguistic duality. Far from seeing Canadian bilingualism as doomed to failure, participants emphasized the mutually reinforcing linkages they saw between this ideal and that of Canadian multiculturalism.”¹⁸

III. Intersections at the working level: Official languages and diversity as seen day-to-day by federal public servants

A particular challenge that the Office of the Commissioner has continued to face has been the perception that bilingualism requirements (usually French-language requirements) for certain federal jobs—from junior positions to the most senior levels—are an impediment for diversity in the public service. As one English-speaking public servant explained: “I am committed to official languages and also believe in equity, diversity and inclusion; these two frameworks often clash. [The federal government] needs to give guidance.”¹⁹ This individual was certainly right about one thing: We need to better explain how official languages are an integral part of—and not separate from—equity, diversity and inclusion in the federal public service.

Francophones, especially, can face barriers to using their first official language at work. For starters, they have access to far fewer jobs in their language—whereas most positions (54%) in the core public administration may require English only, only 8% may require French only.²⁰ An online survey conducted in 2019 by the Office of the Commissioner on linguistic insecurity among public servants revealed that, among the more than 5,000 Francophones surveyed, 44% (nearly half!) said that they had felt or would feel uncomfortable using French at work, despite the fact that it was their right to do so.²¹ This contrasted sharply with the results among their Anglophone colleagues, 15% of whom said they had felt or would feel uncomfortable using English at work. Notably, among those Anglophones uncomfortable using English, a disproportionate number were in federal offices in Quebec (outside the National Capital Region), where English is the official language of the linguistic minority (see Figure 3). The same survey

¹⁷ Commissioner of Official Languages, [Notes for a keynote address on Canada’s linguistic duality in a multicultural framework](#), Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 15, 2013.

¹⁸ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, [What new Canadians can tell us about the Canada of tomorrow: Discussion forums on the perspectives of Canadians of diverse backgrounds on Linguistic Duality](#), Summary Report, 2014, p. 6.

¹⁹ Comment of a survey respondent, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, [Linguistic \(in\)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada](#), Study report, 2021, 63 p.

²⁰ More precisely, in 2021, 50% of positions were identified as “English essential” positions, 3.7% were “French essential” positions and 4.4% were “English or French essential” positions. Less than half, 41.9%, were identified as “Bilingual” positions. Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, [Annual Report on Official Languages 2020–21](#), Appendix D, Table 2, p. 50.

²¹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, [Linguistic \(in\)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada](#), *op. cit.*, p. 6.

found that one in five Francophone employees even felt uncomfortable using French with their direct supervisor, the person most responsible for ensuring that their French-language rights are respected.²² Among those Francophones who said they would feel uncomfortable writing in their language at work, two in five were concerned that they “might be seen as a troublemaker,” and among those who would feel uncomfortable speaking French at work, one in three said that “colleagues tend to just switch to [English].”²³

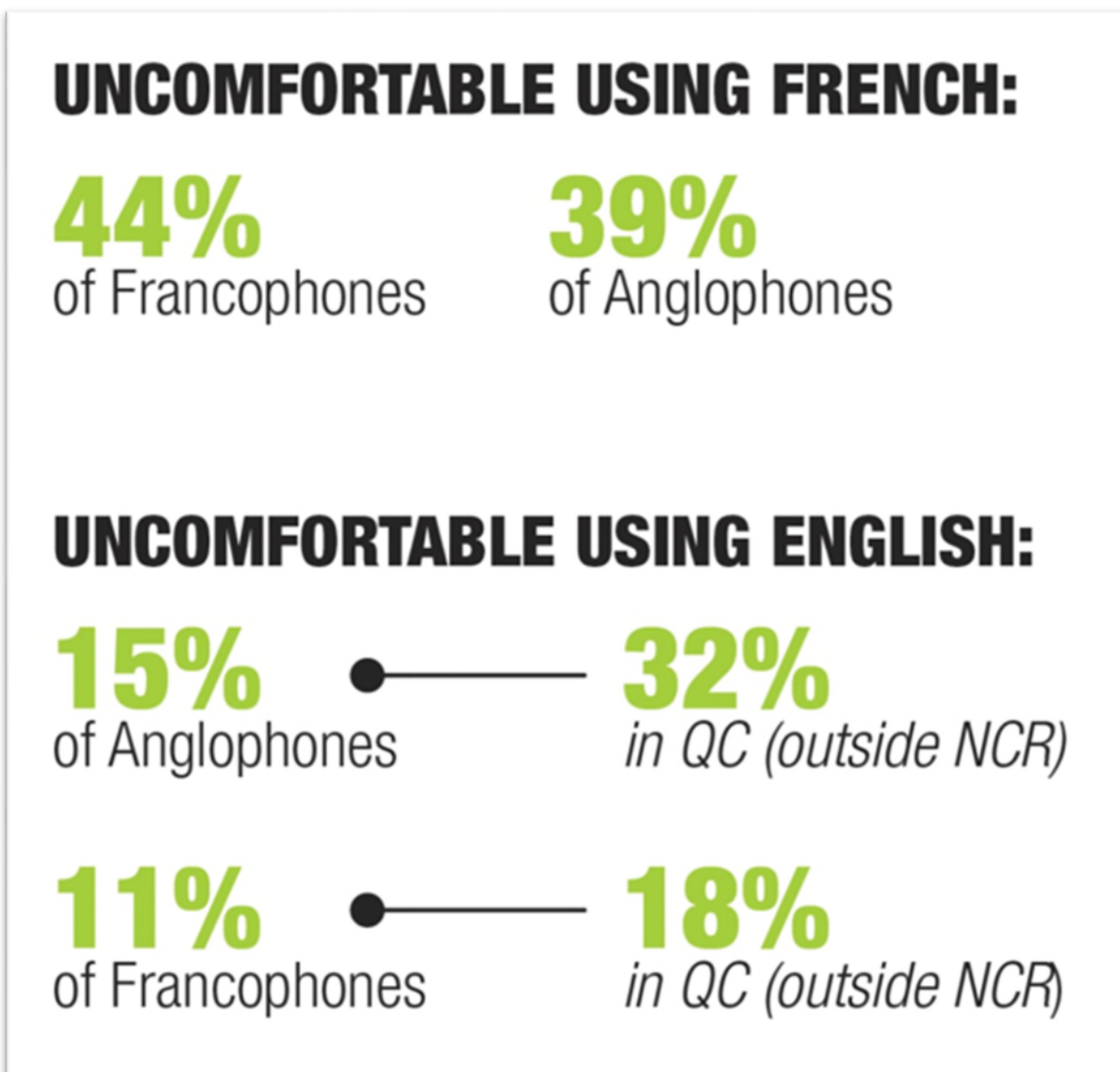


Figure 3. Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, Linguistic (in)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada (2021).

Under these circumstances, rolling back language rights would only add to the barriers already faced by many Francophones, including thousands of French-speaking public servants from employment equity

²² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

groups. Within the core public administration of the federal government, 32% of female employees, 25% of Indigenous employees, 24% of employees with disabilities, and 22% of employees from visible minorities are Francophones.²⁴ As one respondent to the linguistic insecurity survey put it, “The effect of marginalizing Francophones also has an effect on public servants’ career advancement, even more so for myself as a visible minority with an accent.”²⁵ And yet somehow the diversity within the pan-Canadian Francophonie seems to be lost in much of the English-language discourse outside Quebec. I wonder: How many of us are aware of the fact that, after English, the most commonly known language among immigrants, among visible minorities and among Indigenous Canadians is French? According to the 2016 Census,²⁶ roughly one in ten Canadian Francophones is a member of a visible minority (meaning 800,000 people), one in ten is an immigrant (again, 800,000 people), and one in forty is Indigenous (200,000 people). Each of these proportions is even higher outside Quebec, where French-language rights and, by extension, the diversity that those rights help to safeguard are particularly vulnerable.²⁷

Fortunately, many public servants themselves, both Anglophones and Francophones, recognize that promoting official language rights in the public service can contribute to inclusivity by allowing both groups to participate more fully and because of the positive values they project. As one public servant from Atlantic Canada explained, it fostered for her a sense of empathy:

Coming from my background, where you’re Black and you’re coming from a community and proving that you need to be where you are and you have rights, equal rights . . . I know that dynamic. I don’t know what it is to be a Francophone, but I know what it is to have something that you are owed, that you are obligated by law to have access to, and [to] not be given it.²⁸

For another public servant, a young Francophone professional from Quebec responding to the Office of the Commissioner’s 2019 survey, promoting official languages goes hand-in-hand with multiculturalism: “Making everyone in Canada bilingual, starting with the next generation, is putting us one step closer to being a proudly multicultural and multi-ethnic country. How cool would it be to go anywhere in Canada and everyone speaks . . . French, English and everything in between?”²⁹ She wasn’t alone. In Quebec, English-speaking survey respondents showed a particular openness to working in both languages, and

²⁴ Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Annual Report on Official Languages 2020–21, *op. cit.*, Table 18, p. 61. Data on LGBTQ+ individuals was not provided in the report. As regards gender identity, the Office of the Commissioner’s 2019 survey on linguistic insecurity invited respondents to indicate a gender identity of “other (option to specify),” but the number of responses was insufficient to permit a separate analysis. We did, however, examine whether women were more likely to experience linguistic insecurity, but we did not observe this tendency in the data.

²⁵ Translation of a comment from a survey respondent, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Linguistic (in)security at work: Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Most recent data available at the time of writing this article.

²⁷ Raymond Th  berge, “Let’s be honest about multiculturalism and official bilingualism: Perspectives from the Commissioner of Official Languages”, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–24.

²⁸ “[Managing Linguistic Insecurities / G  rer les ins  curit  s linguistiques – Discussion en groupe](#),” conference organized by the National Managers’ Community, Atlantic Region, in collaboration with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, Atlantic Region, 25:05–25:33.

²⁹ Comment of a survey respondent, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Linguistic (in)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada*, *op. cit.*

among Anglophone respondents in all of the regions studied, two out of five actually wanted *more* opportunities to use French at work.³⁰

The comments of another survey respondent, who was himself multilingual but who did not yet speak French, were equally illustrative. For him, the answer was not to reduce official languages requirements for federal public service jobs, but rather to improve access to language training:

English is my second language, I speak three other languages as well, French will be [my] fifth. Without providing the proper access to French language training, [however,] I see [the] bilingual requirement as an obstacle in my career, as most senior positions are bilingual. In my humble opinion, [the] government of Canada should provide easy access to French training for all employees to promote bilingualism, diversity, and inclusiveness.³¹

He wasn't the only one. Whereas the most common recommendation among Anglophone survey respondents was to call for more language training, less than 4% wanted to reduce bilingualism requirements. One respondent put it this way: "[I am] so jealous of Europeans speaking, like five languages and not thinking anything of it! [I] wish we could increase exposure to both the official languages and the cultures. And some of the Indigenous languages and cultures, too."³²

Clearly, for these federal public servants, when it comes to diversity and inclusion, we should aspire to more, not less.

IV. The ultimate judgement of the federal apparatus: Official languages and diversity as seen by some of Canada's most senior public servants, Supreme Court Judges

For some of the most senior offices of the federal apparatus, the relationship between diversity and official bilingualism has been a particular flashpoint of late, notably the government's policy of appointing bilingual Supreme Court Judges. Never mind the fact that, according to the available survey data, a majority of Canadians, including a majority of individuals from diverse backgrounds, agrees that Supreme Court Judges should be able to speak both official languages.³³

But what we don't often hear is what the judges—the ultimate arbiters of our laws, values and norms—might think of it themselves. A scan of the applications of recent appointees, made publicly available since 2015, suggests that for Justice Nicholas Kasirer from Quebec, Justice Malcolm Rowe from Newfoundland and Labrador, and Justice Sheilah Martin from Alberta, multiculturalism, Indigeneity *and* official languages all figure high on the list of what constitutes Canadian diversity.³⁴ When asked "How has your experience provided you with insight into the variety and diversity of Canadians and their unique perspectives?" Justice Kasirer explained that "two elements . . . have contributed to my

³⁰ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Linguistic (in)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³¹ Comment of a survey respondent, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Linguistic (in)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada*, *op. cit.*

³² Comment of a survey respondent, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Linguistic (in)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada*, *op. cit.*

³³ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, [Official Languages Tracking Survey 2021 – Final Report](#), prepared for the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages by Environics Research Group, 2021, p. 19.

³⁴ Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada, "[The Honourable Sheilah Martin's questionnaire](#)," 2017.

understanding of the benefits brought by pluralism to the administration of justice: a professional commitment to bilingualism and a personal and family life steeped in Montréal’s cultural hybridity.”³⁵ Responding to the same question, Justice Rowe spoke about the importance of interacting with Canadians “from a multiplicity of backgrounds,” including “immigrants or the children of immigrants” from across Canada, individuals living “the francophone reality in Quebec and outside Quebec,” and people who could speak to “the situation of First Nations and Inuit,” among others.³⁶ In a similar vein, Justice Martin cited official language rights alongside the “protection of a multicultural society” and “the collective rights [of] Indigenous Peoples” to explain how “the chosen arc of Canadian history remains toward community and inclusion.”³⁷



Figure 4. Supreme Court Justice Mahmud Jamal, appointed in 2021, and Justice Michelle O’Bonsawin, appointed in 2022. Source: Supreme Court of Canada.

Perhaps one of the most illustrative statements came from one of the most recent Supreme Court appointees and its first member of a visible minority, Justice Mahmud Jamal, an Anglophone from Ontario. For him, the opportunity to work in different parts of the country and to use both official languages in court had, as he put it, “awakened in me a greater sensitivity to Canadian diversity and the intellectual and cultural richness that comes with it.” As he explained, it had “[helped] me to learn . . . about the differences across jurisdictions and, more importantly, about the many

³⁵ Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada, “[The Honourable Nicholas Kasirer’s questionnaire](#),” 2019.

³⁶ Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada, “[The Honourable Malcolm Rowe’s questionnaire](#),” 2016.

³⁷ Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada, “[The Honourable Sheilah Martin’s questionnaire](#),” 2017.

commonalities that bring us together. These experiences deepened my conviction in the diversity and essential unity of our country, its peoples, and the Canadian legal profession.”³⁸

Justice Jamal’s newest colleague on the Supreme Court bench, Justice Michelle O’Bonsawin, also from Ontario, is equally well positioned to speak to the intersections between official bilingualism and Canada’s broader diversity. Appointed in September 2022, O’Bonsawin is the first Indigenous Supreme Court Judge of Canada. Her background as “a francophone First Nations woman,” she explained, “is a clear example of the intersectional diversity that makes our country so special.” As a member of a Francophone minority and as an Abenaki woman, Justice O’Bonsawin explained how, over the course of her life, she has at times been subject to more than one form of marginalization: “Although I grew up speaking a marginalized language in a predominantly Anglophone community, I have personally experienced how certain people can be inclusive while others can be exclusionary and insensitive towards my First Nations and francophone heritage.” She notes, however, that such exclusionary attitudes are not held by all Canadians, thanks in part to the country’s growing diversity: “Even after living through such encounters, I still believe we, as a nation, are more inclusive and diverse today than ever.”³⁹

V. Speaking for ourselves: Diversity, official languages and public opinion

At the end of the day, what really matters, when it comes to official languages and Canada’s broader diversity, is the perception of those whom the federal government is meant to serve—Canadians, including those who are themselves of a diverse background.

On this point, scholars and commentators who frequently speak to these issues may wish to check in with the average Canadian to hear what they really think. In December 2021 at the Reconciling Multiculturalism in Today’s Canada symposium held at the University of Alberta to mark the 50th anniversary of Canada’s multiculturalism policy,⁴⁰ there was much talk among a few participants about how the recognition of two official languages is an affront to (rather than an affirmation of) Canada’s diversity. It was implicitly assumed that this framing reflected the views of many Canadians, including Canadians from diverse backgrounds, such as immigrants, members of racialized groups, Indigenous people, or individuals whose mother tongue is neither English nor French. Interestingly, the participants asserting this point during the panel in question did so in only one language—English. If the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan famously observed, then the practical message here was not exactly one that lent itself to greater cultural-linguistic heterogeneity.

So, what do Canadians think? How might the experiences of those from diverse backgrounds intersect with their perceptions about official languages?

A public opinion telephone survey (n=1,507) conducted by Environics Research for the Office of the Commissioner in the fall of 2021 suggests that support for official languages actually *corresponds* with support for other forms of diversity. The results of the probability survey show that a strong majority of Canadians—among both Anglophones and Francophones—agrees with statements about the mutually

³⁸ Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada, “[The Honourable Mahmud Jamal’s questionnaire](#),” 2021.

³⁹ Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada, “[The Honourable Michelle O’Bonsawin’s questionnaire](#),” 2022.

⁴⁰ [Reconciling Multiculturalism in Today’s Canada](#), University of Alberta, November 2021 to January 2022.

reinforcing potential of official languages and other forms of diversity, including multiculturalism. In the same survey, “those from diverse backgrounds also tend to agree with statements about official languages as something that can accompany or reinforce other forms of diversity, at rates similar to and sometimes greater than other respondents.”⁴¹

More precisely, Canadians—including younger people and those from diverse backgrounds—agree that:

- “Having two official languages, instead of just one official language, sends the signal that Canada values linguistic diversity.”
 - 86% overall
 - 91% among 18- to 34-year-olds
 - 87% among people whose mother tongue is neither English nor French
- “Having two official languages has made Canada a more welcoming place for immigrants from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.”
 - 79% overall
 - 85% among 18- to 34-year-olds
 - 79% among people born outside Canada
- “Canada’s official bilingualism policy and its multiculturalism policy work well together.”
 - 68% overall (same among Anglophones and Francophones)
 - 70% among 18- to 34-year-olds
 - 75% among racialized minorities

Encouragingly, especially in the context of reconciliation, 78% believe that Canada can and should promote both official languages *and* Indigenous languages.⁴²

⁴¹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Official Languages Tracking Survey 2021 – Final Report, op. cit.*, p. 8. The margin of sampling error for the 2021 national telephone survey was ± 2.5 % at the 95% confidence interval. The margins of error were greater for subsamples of the population.

⁴² 89% among those aged 18 to 34 years. The number of Indigenous respondents in the overall sample was very small (n=57), but among those respondents, 92% agreed with the statement. Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Official Languages Tracking Survey 2021 – Final report, op. cit.*, p. 8.

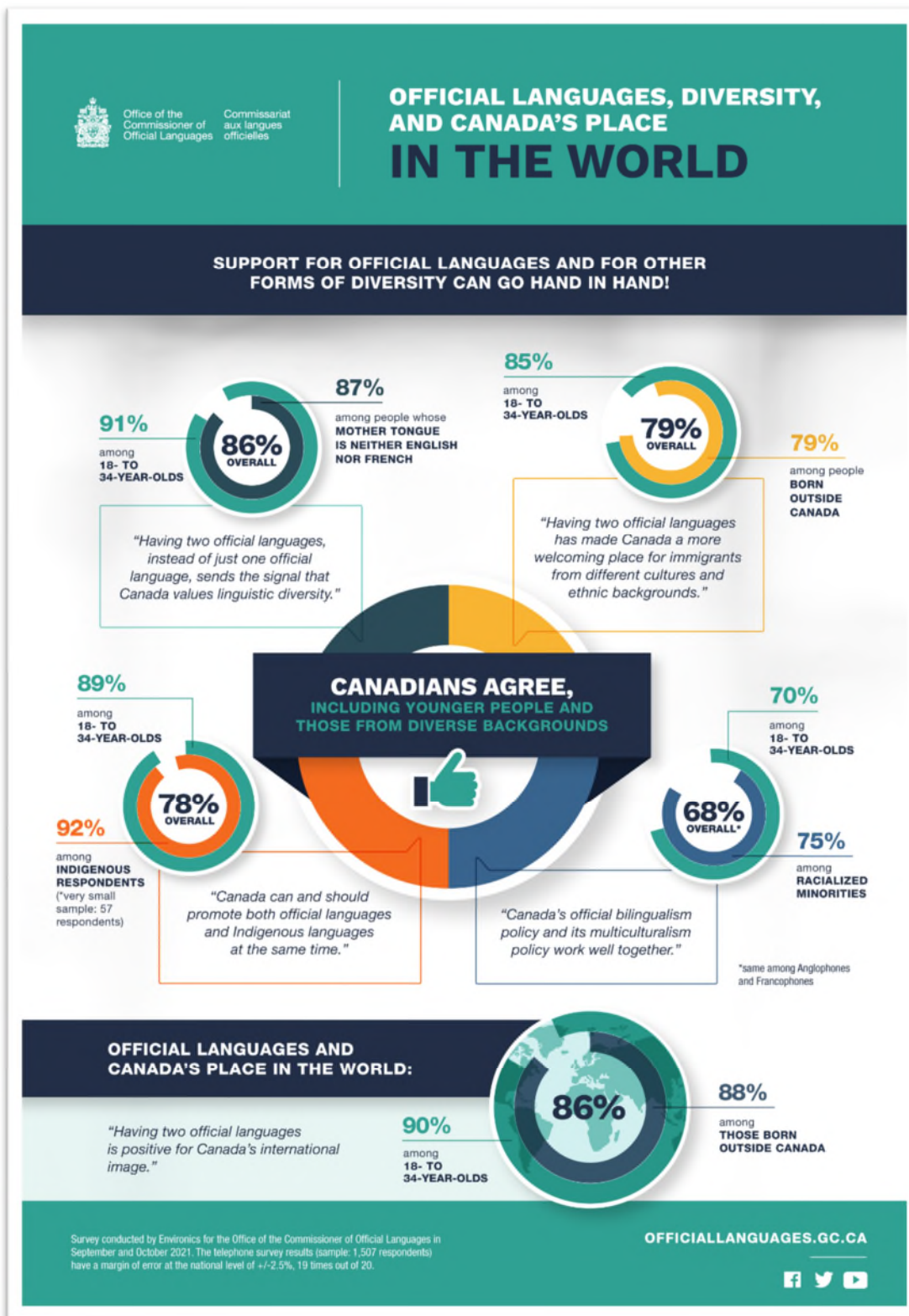


Figure 5. Infographic showing Canadians' perceptions of the relationship between official languages and diversity. Source: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2022.

As I have stated elsewhere, learning (sometimes with great difficulty) to accommodate two languages instead of just one over the course of our history has helped Canadians to see how difference and diversity are strengths, not weaknesses, and this in turn has helped to foster a greater openness toward other cultures.⁴³ To that effect, having two languages of integration across the country, instead of just one, remains our best defence against the homogenizing policy of “melting pot” assimilationism that has prevailed elsewhere. The Office of the Commissioner’s 2021 survey on official languages and bilingualism would appear to substantiate these hypotheses. An online component of the survey (n=1,500) showed that support for official languages coincides with a more tolerant outlook in general. Whereas the small minority of Canadians who opposed the *Official Languages Act* also tended to believe that Canada has “gone too far in pushing equal rights” and that immigration “threatens long-held Canadian values,” the large majority who do support the *Official Languages Act* tended to disagree with those statements.⁴⁴

Far from being an impediment to diversity, the promotion of official bilingualism within the federal public service can help to engender pluralism and inclusion within federal institutions. It allows them to better reflect the different realities of Canadians in a context where many Francophone public servants in particular have reported experiencing more barriers to using their language at work. We mustn’t forget that bilingualism is an important part of—and not apart from—Canadian diversity, equity and inclusion.

⁴³ Robert J. Talbot, “Why Linguistic Duality Still Matters, 50 Years After the OLA: An Anglophone Majority Perspective”, in [Linguistic Duality, De Jure and De Facto](#), Canadian Issues, Association for Canadian Studies, Fall/Winter 2019, pp. 6–10.

⁴⁴ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Official Languages Tracking Survey 2021 – Final Report, op. cit.*, p. 39.