

'MISSED / THE FIRST WHITE WAVES COME NUZZLING AT [OUR] FEET': THOUGHTS ON BILINGUALISM IN NEW BRUNSWICK¹

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In 2010, I wrote the first editorial in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of New Brunswick Studies/Revue d'études sur le Nouveau-Brunswick (JNBS/RÉNB)*. Since that time, the journal has published thirteen issues, each providing a forum for people to write about a province that, as I said in 2010, “has not expended much intellectual capital or ink on understanding itself.”

To a large extent, that remains the case today. Sure, we have a vibrant provincial media, but, on balance, much of it serves political, corporate, or other partisan interests. As a subject of study and reflection, New Brunswick remains lightly considered.

As *JNBS/RÉNB* enters its tenth year, it is worth remembering why the journal was founded, for it differs markedly from most provincial media. It doesn't collect advertising revenue, or revenue of any kind; it doesn't trumpet any one agenda or institutional line; and it undertakes to be as open as possible, believing that a New Brunswick journal should be bilingual, multidisciplinary, open-access, and responsive to the present as well as the past.

JNBS/RÉNB continues to be relevant because its editorial board believes in the importance of creating space for perspectives other than those hardened into what we are told is “in the public interest” or just the way things have always been done in New Brunswick. We endeavour, then, to accommodate ideas and opinions that go beyond the editorial and the sound bite, for wider context and development offer the greatest likelihood of moving New Brunswick forward.

A glimpse back to our first issue is revealing in that regard. In that issue, Margaret Conrad, Herménégilde Chiasson, Donald Savoie, and Julian Walker addressed provincial concerns with a depth of vision that has modelled how problems have been subsequently discussed in the province. Whether in the areas of identity, linguistic diversity, economic sustainability, or journalistic freedom, those problems, our first essayists concluded, appear increasingly incompatible with the systems we have devised to address them.

In other words, our systems of governance, accommodation, development, and democratic expression seem unsuited to addressing our most acute provincial challenges, a circumstance that warrants journals like *JNBS/RÉNB* to continue doing what they do.

As I hand over the editorial reins of the journal after a decade at the helm, I'd like to employ the journal's characteristic mode of address—sustained reflection—to consider a still-smoldering provincial issue, perhaps the issue that most fully defines and animates us. That issue is bilingualism. At some risk, I will share my own bilingualism story to illustrate the misalignment of challenges and systems of redress in New Brunswick.

On Bilingualism

My bilingualism story is a personal story because bilingualism is a deeply felt personal experience in New Brunswick. As I have said and written publicly many times, the vast majority of my English-speaking friends, neighbours, and colleagues consider bilingualism to be a cornerstone of provincial identity. We may not speak French well—or, in some cases, at all—but that does not deter us from sharing in this incredibly progressive vision for our province.

In my own case, I come from two French grandfathers (one Acadian and one Quebecois) and two English grandmothers. None of my grandparents spoke the language of their spouses well at marriage, a circumstance not uncommon in northern New Brunswick at the time. Because my grandmothers were English, however, their children's first language was English by default. The phrase "mother tongue" has its provenance in this maternal primacy.

Added to this was a system of longstanding inequities in New Brunswick that invested disproportionately in English services, even in Francophone areas. The result was that schools, hospitals, industrial jobs, and other aspects of the social network had evolved to become dominantly English. More directly put, the northern New Brunswick that I grew up in in the 1960s and 70s put English first and French second, even though we all lived *côté à côté* and even though almost nothing was formally divided.

English and French kids went to the same schools (though different classrooms), played on the same minor sports teams, and went freely in and out of each other's houses. The only difference was that language learning moved one way: the French kids learned English. Some of my English friends were luckier or smarter or had parents with longer visions, but most of us rested comfortably in the protections of a dominant English order.

When I speak today with those English kids I grew up with in northern New Brunswick, most tell me that they have tried, with uneven success, to rectify what they feel was a missed opportunity.

It bears stating and emphasizing that many of us carry this sense of missed opportunity in our provincial DNA. It is a part of our identity that we don't talk much about. We not only feel that loss in our blood, for many of us have French ancestry, but we also feel it consequentially. We feel, to be frank, partially incomplete. That is not the guilt of the overlord, but the sense of what a fuller bilingual citizenship might offer, how it would deepen our understanding of the province and of the world. Such is the benefit of a second language.

In my own case, I have worked hard (and, like my childhood friends, with uneven success) to rectify this missed opportunity. It has not been easy, certainly more of a marathon than a sprint, which is why I feel compelled to tell a small part of my New Brunswick story. What I want to highlight is one of the biggest obstacles I've had to overcome to acquire a measure of bilingual citizenship in the province in which I've lived for almost six decades.

In a word, that obstacle is *New Brunswick* itself.

When smatterings of night classes with other tired professionals produced few results, I carved out one half-year sabbatical and another partial leave to take a more immersive approach to language

learning. My hope was to find a program in New Brunswick where I could do this, but my hope was dashed. Despite months of trying, I could not find the programs or infrastructure here to provide me with anything approaching an immersive three-month language-learning experience.

As a result, I left New Brunswick twice to pursue what I needed, first at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi in northern Quebec and next at a French language institute in France. Both programs were excellent and moved my French fluency forward by noticeable degrees.

But why did I have to leave New Brunswick, as many adults must? Why did I have to leave Canada's only bilingual province to improve my French? Could it be for the same reason that our Anglophone school districts have a shortage of French supply teachers? Could it be for the same reason that tensions continue between both dominant language groups in New Brunswick?

I don't tell this story to blame some abstraction for my own deficiencies but, rather, to point out a contradiction that many English citizens of the province are all too familiar with. Many want to learn French but have few opportunities to do so in this bilingual province. The ironies of this situation reveal much about our two-tiered history that we would rather not talk about. But it is a history that still defines us—and a history, I believe, that still limits what we could become.

As I think about my own relationship to the French language, I think about missed opportunities not only in personal terms but also in provincial terms. I think about a New Brunswick that continues to struggle to move forward economically, all the while having in its lap one of the greatest resources imaginable in a globalizing world: the potential of a majority of its citizens to speak more than one language.

Instead, we expend countless public and private dollars to maintain and defend an earlier-generation economic model that defines progress in terms of pipelines, new carbon sourcing, and ever-more intrusive harvesting of resources. Why are we so myopic when a twenty-first-century solution to our economic woes is already legislated and in our midst?

I'm not being provocative or anti-industry in framing the provincial condition in this way (though it will be assumed I am), but I'm asking a question that seems eminently reasonable. Surely I'm not the first person to be asking this question. Why do we make it so hard on ourselves to proceed? Why are we so averse to obvious solutions? Is it not partly the case that our province's failure to advance in a post-Confederation economy was because of a reluctance to move beyond what had once worked so well?

These are important questions that I hope our provincial leaders are discussing. If they are not—and it appears that is the case—then something is amiss.

That fine-tuning French immersion for children is a subject of vigorous discussion and disagreement is a good sign. That English parents stand fiercely in defence of that program is a good sign, too.

But where are the language cafés that adults of both languages can visit to improve their second-language skills? And where are the formal programs? The blueprint, for example, that would detail a process by which an employer could receive a tax break to allow a couple of employees a year to take a four-week leave of absence to study French or English? The provincial government has such a program

for its own staff—and successive Anglophone premiers have benefitted greatly from French lessons—but where are the programs for others?

What is the government currently funding and what could it be crediting? Where are the universities in this, with their abundance of unoccupied classrooms in the evening and on weekends, not to mention their teaching staffs? Where is the will at the level of communities—French communities welcoming Anglophones for week-long language tourism in the summer and English communities welcoming Francophones similarly? Where are the local chambers of commerce, committed, as they always are and must be, to advancing the province commercially? Where are the provincial curricula that are bold and brave enough to move beyond the *saveur du mois* (currently expressed as “global competencies”) to an equally meaningful localist vision, a vision that foregrounds New Brunswick’s needs as much as the needs of others? Alberta, BC, and Quebec fight fiercely for their own provincial interests. Why don’t we?

Clearly, we have a long way to go—and the status quo is not getting us there. Today, the vast majority of English New Brunswickers are on their own if they want to learn the legislated other language of the province. They must leave to improve their French. Because most cannot, the divide between English and French grows, the problems of dualism overshadow the benefits of bilingualism, and small groups of self-interested ideologues on both sides of the language line shape the debate for the majority. Surely there is another way.

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Notes

¹ Irving Layton. “Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom.” *Collected Poems: Irving Layton*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965. 175–6.