

The Other Side of the Coin – Commentary by Sharon Buchanan – President of ARA

Description

The Other Side of the Coin ...

A different perspective on bilingualism and language tensions

Not in many years, and I would daresay never in my lifetime, has language been such a contentious issue in New Brunswick. I should know – I'm one of the leaders driving this bus.

As the President of the Anglophones Rights Association (ARA), I actively encourage and seek out those willing to voice their thoughts and concerns on the issues, whether I personally support their viewpoints or not. I encourage those of like-minded concerns to unite and support one another. I encourage those in opposition to engage in respectful dialogue to foster understanding, respect, and cooperation.

Why? Because there are conversations that need to be had. Conversations that should have been had long ago, but have been actively discouraged.

In a land in which Free Speech is protected and valued – I shouldn't have to say this, but in light of the current state, it seems necessary – having a differing view or opinion does not mean being anti. Differences are what make us unique and interesting. They are also what allow us to voice concerns, raise challenges, and promote thought, respect, and cooperation. If we can't acknowledge and appreciate this, then we are lost before we even begin.

Contrary to what some would have you believe, ARA is not anti-bilingual, anti-French, bigoted, or whatever label that those who are afraid to engage in genuine give-and-take dialogue would like to give us. We are citizens, both French and English (yes, we have several French members), who see some good, and some bad with our current linguistic situation. We recognize opportunities, and we recognize areas where we can do much better. We also recognize failures, and we are not afraid to acknowledge them, or to call for remedial action.

As Alana Conner, executive director of Stanford University's Social Psychological Answers to Real-World Questions Center pointed out, telling people they're racist, bigoted, etc. is going to get you absolutely nowhere. When people feel threatened or attacked they shut down, and they are not going to listen, not going to learn, and not going to change. When an individual or group feels a negative impact on their daily life, or sees a negative impact on someone close to them, and tries to raise a concern about a circumstance only to hear a politician, journalist, or community leader call them racist and point out their privilege, they feel like elites are trying to distract from the serious problems in their lives and grant advantages to other groups at their expense. This behavior does nothing to improve the situation, and everything to send a message that the "attitudes" of oppositionally opinioned individuals are a justification for lawmakers and other elites to ignore their problems.

And there are problems with the current linguistic state. Are they problems that can't be worked out or

overcome? Only if we allow them to be. Are they problems that must, by their very nature, forever divide us? Again, only if we allow them to.

For more than 50 years, we have allowed two ruling political parties to play political games at our expense. We have allowed them take the rights and the needs of our population and use them in a power play to pit us against one another. We have allowed them to bastardize our Charter and its intentions, by altering, amending, and constantly evolving additional Acts and Policies without consideration of, respect for, and in the interests of its population.

The government is Constitutionally required to protect and promote both linguistic communities, and they have failed to do so. Protection requires more than simply throwing money at an issue time and again without benefit. It requires fostering the environment for the community to thrive and protect itself, as well as fostering the ownership within the communities to participate in their own protection and promotion. While a protected minority has every right to expect reasonable support, including financial, we are failing to see much in the way of benefit, and a great deal in the way of disadvantage and burden as a result of current initiatives. It is interesting to note that the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that government is under no obligation to create a benefit to any group, but that when they do, it cannot place disadvantage or burden on another.

Where is the true protection of our Francophone communities? Where is their economic hub? Where is the environment for the French in New Brunswick to live and work within their community should they wish to do so? Oh, we have a “Language of Work” policy, but that policy creates burdens and disadvantages on the English-speaking communities and population.

Statistics Canada identifies “mother-tongue” as the language first learned and understood. When a child arrives at school on day one unable, or barely able, to function in French, is their Mother-Tongue, in fact, French? No, it isn't. Their ancestry may be French – however, they, by nature of the environment in which they were raised, are not, in fact, French. This is one issue that needs to be considered. In order to have a true understanding of our French population – we need to have an accurate reflection of linguistic profiles, not simply what their parents choose to put on the census.

On the flip side of the coin, where is the protection of English-speaking communities? Where is the protection against economically forced urban migration, imposing upon them the adaptation to, and use of, another's language to meet the newly altered landscape? Where is the right of English-speaking communities to live and work in their language without interference?

While the courts have always been liberal in their interpretation with regards to language rights, they have also ruled that equality rights do not necessarily mean treating everyone the same, and that doing this can, in fact, sometimes create tremendous injustice. The courts have also ruled that equality rights can no longer be limited to historically disadvantaged groups, nor to only enumerated characteristics. Also ruled upon by the Supreme Court of Canada, equality rights cannot be invoked to enlarge or invalidate other provisions of the Charter, and that a section 15 (Equality) violation may be a consequence of the implementation of governing legislation, rather than the legislation itself. Many other Supreme Court decisions on equality rights over the past twenty years may be of significant interest.

Where is the Chartered Right of every citizen to live and work in any province in Canada, to use their language, and to participate and run for office in their government? Why are unilingual individuals, both

English and French, denied advancement opportunities or even entry to their chosen fields?

There is much to be gained in learning and using a second or even third or more language ... should one choose to do so, and should the tools, resources and environment be available with which to do it, and maintain it. There is nothing, however, in our Constitution which requires it. In fact, our Constitution gives each of our languages the right of equal status, and benefit, and protection, but we aren't seeing that. While the French are justified in their efforts to prevent assimilation (being forced to adopt the English language for their survival), the English being "forced" to adopt and use the French language is being overlooked.

In addition to the living evolution of the Official Languages Act, we have a policy on linguistic duality, which directly opposes the idea of bilingualism by encouraging the creation of separate living and functioning environments for both linguistic communities.

Well, which is it – are we working towards bilingualism (in which case we need to look at education, training, and demographic environment), or separation (in which case each community should remain separate and autonomous according to demographics)?

Whichever way we go, there are challenges. Challenges are never insurmountable. They just require work, and cooperation. Challenges also sometimes require re-evaluation, course correction, and sometimes scrapping the effort and starting again.

I don't have all of the answers, but I do have a lot of questions. There are questions that I would like to ask, and receive answers to, without attack or intimidation. There are questions that I would like to be given genuine and open-minded consideration, and there are questions that I believe can be worked out ... together.

The one thing I do know is that I am done allowing two power-hungry political entities to play games with my future, and that of my children and grandchildren. I am done with allowing the whims of the government of the day to inflict itself on the daily activities, environment, and personal life choices, family, and community.

There are many specifics of which I could speak, including education, health care, employment, economics, with facts and dollars to support each ... but I'll leave that for another day. Most of it is public knowledge, for those who care enough to know.

I fully support the intention of bilingualism, and the rights afforded by our Charter as originally written and un-amended by the Province of New Brunswick, according to their sitting government of the moment. I support the effort to make bilingualism achievable and accessible to all. I recognize and appreciate the contributions of both linguistic communities, as well as the many cultures and languages which have helped to shape this country.

I do not support our current state of affairs.

Come election time, I will be making my position very clear, and I will be looking for more than bones tossed to a dog and more than words to pacify a restless beast. I will be looking for sincerity, empathy, and action. Right now, I see it in only one party. My hope is that by election time, I will see it in others.

Sharon Buchanan
President
Anglophone Rights Association
of New Brunswick (ARANB)

As a result of numerous requests, a GoFundMe account has been created for those who wish to support our efforts while maintaining anonymity.

Category

1. News
2. Uncategorized

Date Created

2016-12-30

default watermark