Canada's bilingual? Whom are we kidding?
After 42 years and billions of dollars, just 7 per cent of anglophone Canadians can carry on a conversation in French

BY MARIAN SCOTT, THE GAZETTE  NOVEMBER 28, 2011

MONTREAL - The best thing Stacy Legallee’s parents ever did was to send him to French school.

Now 47 and fluent not just in French and English, but also in Spanish, the well-travelled musician and studio engineer says knowing both official languages has enriched his life immeasurably.

“I think, if anything, it’s one of the great assets that Canada has, to declare itself a bilingual country,” said Legallee, who is pursuing a degree in English literature at Concordia University after a 30-year music career.

“That’s why even after years of travelling around and working in different countries, I’m proud to be a Canadian.”

In the 42 years since the federal government adopted the Official Languages Act, many Canadians
have come to see bilingualism as the country’s defining trait.

But the recent furor over the appointment of a unilingual federal auditor-general and the revelation that two executives at the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec can’t speak French have highlighted the cracks in Canada’s bilingual façade.

A new book raises questions over whether Canada can even lay claim to be a bilingual country.

While many Canadians uphold bilingualism as a quintessential value, that belief is not actually borne out by the proportion of citizens who speak both official languages, according to Life After 40: Official Languages Policy in Canada, edited by Jack Jedwab and Rodrigue Landry (Queen’s Policy Studies Series, McGill-Queen’s University Press). The book is due out next month.

After four decades and billions of dollars spent on official bilingualism, just seven per cent of anglophones outside Quebec are able to carry on a conversation in French, writes Jedwab, executive director of the Association for Canadian Studies.

Overall, 17 per cent of Canadians speak both official languages, mainly thanks to Quebecers, of whom 41 per cent are bilingual.

The popularity of French immersion has boosted French skills among youth, with nearly 15 per cent of English-speaking Canadians age 15-24 reporting they can speak French.

Still, that lags far behind Europe, Jedwab noted, where 56 per cent of the population is able to hold a conversation in a second language, and 28 per cent of the population can converse in three languages.

In fact, bilingualism in English Canada is only slightly higher than in the United States, considered a unilingual bastion, Jedwab said.

Bilingualism in Canada has always been considered a matter of personal choice, and the main thrust of federal policy has been to provide services for official-language minorities and to ensure both language groups are represented within the civil service, Jedwab said.

The capital of bilingualism is Quebec province, where 41 per cent of the population speaks both French and English - despite the fact the province has only one official language: French.

Seven out of 10 Quebec anglophones are bilingual.

For many students milling about Concordia University’s downtown campus, speaking two or three languages is a daily routine.

“You get to understand people more and different cultures more,” said finance student Maram Witwit, 25, who speaks fluent French, English and Arabic.
“You can express yourself easily to other people no matter what their culture,” she added.

But it’s another story outside Quebec and the so-called bilingualism belt from Moncton, N.B., to Ottawa, Jedwab says.

“There’s a big gap between our message about bilingualism and the extent to which we are bilingual,” he said.

“We are nowhere near as bilingual collectively as we should be. And that’s not only true of parts of the country outside the bilingual belt. Even within the bilingual belt, I don’t think the Ottawa anglophone population is as bilingual as it should be,” Jedwab added.

Matthew Hayday, an associate professor of history at the University of Guelph, and a contributor to the book, said one reason for Canadians’ lacklustre linguistic performance is that learning the country’s other official language has always been considered voluntary.

That attitude spilled over into the current auditor-general debate, he said.

“In English-speaking Canada, there has long been this attitude among a substantial portion of the population that language skills are optional when it comes to job performance within the federal government,” he said.

“Despite 40 years of the Official Languages Act, the idea that someone would be denied access to a senior position of management, even if a good portion of their job will be dealing with French media and supervising francophone civil servants, because that person does not speak French is viewed by many as an unacceptable reason for denying them that position,” Hayday added.

But Hayday slammed the decision to appoint Michael Ferguson.

“I think it’s appalling that he was short-listed, given that bilingualism was a set criteria,” he said.

“It sends the message that the government is not firmly committed to upholding the Official Languages Act. That could have disturbing ramifications to those who believe that this is a core mandate of the federal government,” he said.

Hayday said recent gestures like displaying portraits of the queen in Canadian embassies and adding the word “Royal” to the names of the armed forces are symptomatic of a reaction against a redefinition of Canadian identity beginning in the 1960s under Prime Minister Lester Pearson. Prior to that, the French language was marginalized in the federal government, he said.

That could bode ill for official languages policy, he warned.

“If government is not committed, it’s possible the Official Languages Act will be weakened,” Hayday
however, Jedwab dismissed the notion that Canada could turn its back on 40 years of progress since the adoption of the Official Languages Act under Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

“What Trudeau put into place, I don’t think we’re going to be turning that back, even if some people are grumpy about it,” he said.

**TALKING TONGUES**

**Seventeen per cent** of all Canadians speak both official languages.

**Forty-one per cent** of Quebecers are bilingual.

**Nearly 15 per cent** of English-speaking Canadians age 15-24 report they can speak French.

**In Europe, 56 per cent** of the population speaks a second language and 28 per cent can converse in three languages.

**Seventy per cent** of Quebec anglophones are bilingual.

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