

January 23, 2020

**Reply to Kenneth Whyte's op-ed arguing that the next Conservative leader does not need to be bilingual**

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-do-you-need-to-be-bilingual-to-be-pm-pas-du-tout/>

Desolé Kenneth. Less is not more. Bilingualism is essential. Of course, you also need the policies and the understanding of society, just as you do elsewhere in the country. The role of bilingualism in the past was different. We are on the way to a half a million kids in immersion schooling each year. Public schools now pour out 10's of 1000's of bilingual kids every year. Oh, and Calgary and Vancouver per capita have the most students in immersion.

A commitment to the two official languages is one sign of commitment to the complexity of the country. And a life of experience in several provinces/regions is another sign. Back room boys never were the answer, but even less now.

You may wonder why I speak with such certainty. 20 odd years ago, Lisa Balfour Bowen and I started an organization called Le Français Pour l'Avenir/French for the Future. The idea was to support high school kids in immersion schooling.

It soon expanded to French first-language students outside of Quebec and to new Canadians who were either first-language French or wanted to go into immersion. Tens of thousands of high school students have taken part in our programs all over the country. And let's be clear - while this is very important in our big cities, it is not simply a big city phenomenon. Le Français Pour l'Avenir holds events everywhere from the high arctic to smaller Canadian communities. And I have incredible memories of being in gyms in Iqaluit, Whitehorse, Kenora, Kelowna, St. Mary's in Newfoundland, and on and on.

What is fascinating is that immersion is filled with new Canadians. And their teachers often come to Canada precisely to teach in the system. In other words, bilingualism in Canada looks exactly like Canada. It is just as diverse in every way as the streets of Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. So if I were thinking about leadership of a political party, I would want to keep that in mind.

New Canadians get it. They want their kids to be part of a bilingual country. And my guess is they will vote accordingly.