

## Most of us need not apply for the top jobs

Dan Gardner, The Ottawa Citizen

The hunt is on for Michaëlle Jean's successor at Rideau Hall and Graham Fraser insists the next governor general must not only be an accomplished and respected individual. He or she must be bilingual. Those who cannot speak both French and English should not even be considered for the job.

He would say this, of course. Fraser is the official languages commissioner and a passionate advocate of bilingualism. And this sort of talk has become standard fare in Official Ottawa.

Supreme Court appointments. Senior civil service positions. Any of the country's top jobs. Whether they're covered by the Official Languages Act or not, any opening at the top prompts Fraser and others like him to pop up and insist that bilingualism is a mandatory qualification.

For the most part, Canadians agree. Or they shrug and say nothing, which is the quintessentially Canadian form of agreement. It is telling that a private member's bill that would make bilingualism a legal requirement for appointment to the Supreme Court recently passed the House of Commons -- it's now in the Senate -- with little public controversy.

But let's take a quick peek at some numbers, shall we?

According to the 2006 census, the rate of bilingualism among francophones was 42 per cent. Among anglophones, it was 9.4 per cent. Among allophones -- those whose mother tongue is neither French nor English -- it was 12.1 per cent. Bear in mind that as small as these numbers are, they actually exaggerate the real extent of bilingualism in Canada because they measure only people's self-reported ability to carry on a conversation in French or English. Not only are people notoriously generous in their assessment of their own abilities, being able to chat about the weather falls well below the standard usually expected when bilingualism is a qualification for employment.

But let's take the numbers at face value. And turn them upside down to reveal the portion of the iceberg that lies below the waterline.

The rate of unilingualism among francophones is 58 per cent. Among anglophones, it was 90.6 per cent. Among allophones, 87.9 per cent.

Thus, according to the conventional wisdom as enunciated by Graham Fraser, the overwhelming majority of Canadians should never be considered for any of Canada's top jobs.

It's an interesting state of affairs, particularly when it is contrasted with one of the traditional arguments in favour of gender equality. Women make up 51 per cent of the population, this argument goes. If they are excluded, one-half the available intelligence and energy is squandered. Thus, a country, corporation, or government that wishes to accomplish all it can must make every reasonable effort to include women in their recruitment pool.

Every rational person accepts that argument today. And yet many of the same people are content to say that, for the top jobs in Canada, the overwhelming majority of Canadians are automatically disqualified. No matter how talented and capable they may be. No matter how accomplished. No bilingualism, no job.

Consider what this does for the current search for a governor general. Thanks to the tradition that vice-regal appointments alternate between French and English Canadians -- which is itself arbitrary and dubious, but let's fight one battle at a time -- making bilingualism a mandatory qualification bars at least 90 per cent of candidates before the search even begins. No one would dream of hiring a janitor for Rideau Hall this way and yet lots of people think it's reasonable when deciding who will be in charge at Rideau Hall.

The consequence of mandatory bilingualism is as obvious as it is unmentionable in the polite circles of Official Ottawa: the top jobs often won't go to the best people. Former Supreme Court justice John Major -- his tongue liberated by retirement -- has been blunt about this. Make bilingualism mandatory for Supreme Court judges and you'll still get good people. But you won't get the best.

This is especially true of Canada's court of last resort, where the bilingualism that would be required is not the ability to hold one's own at a cocktail party: It's the fluency needed to hear oral arguments in complex cases and interpret arcane legal texts without benefit of translators. At the same time as we demand this, we will continue to expect that Supreme Court judges will be among the very most brilliant and accomplished jurists in the country. And we will continue to allocate spots regionally: Three go to Quebec, three to Ontario, two to the West, and one to Atlantic Canada.

In all of Canada, the number of truly elite jurists with the bilingual fluency of a Pierre Trudeau is tiny. How many do you suppose there are in Alberta? British Columbia? Nova Scotia? Right. Bonne chance, recruiters.

Of course there's a standard response to this: If you want the job, get the qualification. But in almost every case, those who are so flippantly dismissive either grew up bilingual, or became bilingual in their youth and live and work in those small and unusual pockets where bilingualism is the norm. They have no idea how hard it is for a middle-aged person -- no matter how intelligent or determined -- to achieve bilingual proficiency, particularly if they live in a unilingual environment. The cost in time, effort, and money is enormous. If it can even be done.

The wise employer doesn't expect reality to adapt to his wishes. He adapts to reality.

But Official Ottawa has never been keen on reality. And anyway, the top jobs can always be filled, no matter how tiny the recruitment pool, if we reduce our expectations sufficiently.

Graham Fraser for governor general, anyone?

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