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Book Review

Official Language Policies of the Canadian Provinces: Costs and Benefits in 2006

VAILLANCOURT, François, Olivier COCHE, Marc Antoine CADIEUX, and Jamie Lee RONSON (2012). Vancouver, Fraser Institute, xii, 138 pages. ISSN 1920-0749 Studies in Language Policies.

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In this ambitious and extensive study, François Vaillancourt and his University of Montreal associates propose to evaluate both the costs and the benefits of bilingual services – mainly minority-language schooling – offered by Canada's provincial governments. Unfortunately, the authors calculate costs with unbridled enthusiasm, but measure benefits with undisguised disdain. They conclude thereby that the provinces are spending almost $900 million annually for official bilingualism and receiving precious little in return. A companion study published in 2009, *Official Language Policies at the Federal Level in Canada*, estimates that the federal government spends a further $1.5 billion. Consequently, when both levels are considered, Canadian taxpayers are paying approximately $2.4 billion each year for bilingual services or about $85 per capita (p. 110).

This latest publication in the Fraser Institute's "Studies in Language Policies" series is divided into twelve chapters, preceded by a very helpful "Overview." An introduction and a conclusion are the bookends for reports on each of the ten provinces, presented from west to east, beginning with British Columbia and finishing with Newfoundland and Labrador. The introduction summarises the constitutional guarantees for minority-language educational rights, and presents the methodology used to determine costs and benefits. Subsequent chapters provide province-by-province calculations for government expenditures on official bilingualism. Only three chapters, however, those for Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick, assess the potential benefits. The conclusion adds up overall provincial spending.

Benefits of Official Bilingualism

Although the authors assert that the research literature has ascribed "various benefits" to bilingualism, they mention only one, the "most common," when discussing minority-language education: Increased language capability might lead to increased export capacity (p. 6). By speaking French, Canada might sell more products and services to other French-speaking countries. They quickly rule this out, however, because "almost all exports of goods and services by Canada are made using English" (p. 6). This is an unduly narrow and superficial perspective. Surely language skills will prompt increased productivity and this, in turn, will favourably impact exports. New Brunswick's bilingualism, for example, has sparked a booming call-centre industry (reportedly employing 17,400 persons) and, consequently, a growing telecommunications export market.

The failure to specify other benefits is puzzling and cannot be attributed to ignorance. Elsewhere, Professor Vaillancourt (1996) has suggested many possible advantages including, for an individual, increased intelligence, improved cognitive function and enhanced social skills; and for a society, increased export capacity, improved immigrant recruitment, better knowledge development and added international influence. He could have greatly expanded this list. Are the authors now avoiding variables that are difficult to measure quantitatively? Or are they tampering with the weigh-scales that balance benefits and costs?

Since an official language is by definition a language of political power, a one-language policy in a bilingual society is almost inevitably exclusionist and discriminatory. It severely penalises citizens who are not competent in the privilege-bearing language, effectively blocking their access to influence, authority, information and service. In Canada, the principle of English-French official bilingualism was conceived in a turbulent marriage of justice and practicality. It is now an intrinsic element of our national inheritance. The 1791 *Constitutional Act* – Canada's first modern constitution – entrenched official bilingualism as a fundamental right; the *Constitution Act, 1867* and the *Constitution Act, 1982* further confirmed and defined this right.

How do we assess the benefits of living in such a country? Canada is committed to constitutionalism and the rule of law. Canada has enshrined minority rights and linguistic duality. Canada has promoted cultural diversity and social tolerance. These conditions were won after long political struggle and painful personal sacrifice. And they contribute immeasurably to the quality of our lives. Yet, after studiously ignoring the profound implications of official bilingualism, the authors disingenuously conclude that they "cannot ascertain if the benefits of a larger, more vital francophone minority are worth having or not for a typical Albertan" (p. 18).

Fortunately, as regards healthcare – a bilingual service offered by three provinces –, the authors do recognise an important benefit: "A person's welfare will increase if services are available in his or her preferred language" (p. 7). (Why wouldn't this also be true for education?) But their efforts to quantify this benefit are tortuous and speculative. First, they assume a situation where the provincial government has cancelled the bilingual services. Second, they attempt to guess what proportion of the minority population would still want the now unavailable services. Third, they try to predict how the minority might obtain replacement services publicly, informally or privately. Finally, they endeavour to estimate how much these new services would cost.

This methodology does not measure research observations; it quantifies ungrounded conjectures. If the authors truly desire to monetize benefits, they should work with the appropriate tools, rigorously and systematically, including the willingness to pay (WTP) principle. How much is a consumer willing to pay for an additional unit of a specific good or service? In a free market context, this is normally estimated from current selling prices. But minority-language healthcare services are not for sale on an open and competitive market. Consequently, the authors should conduct carefully-controlled contingent valuation experiments. Assuming, again, that they are sincere in their intentions to reliably measure benefits.

Seven provinces do not, of course, offer bilingual healthcare services. Apparently, this is not important. With unmitigated gall, the authors flippantly conclude that such services would not have brought significant benefits anyway: "Presumably, the francophones who live there do so mainly by choice and thus are satisfied living in an environment where few public services, with the exception of Manitoba in some specific areas, are available in French" (p. 8). This comment is gratuitous and illogical. And it unwittingly reveals the arrogant prejudices that have guided – and fatally undermined – this research study.

Costs of Official Bilingualism

Clearly, the authors have only a passing interest in benefits. Their principal focus is on adding up costs. And here, at least, they begin with a realistic and insightful premise: The true cost of minority-language education is not the total cost, but the *extra* cost. Regardless of language, schooling costs money. But how much *more* must taxpayers spend for minority-language schooling, compared to equivalent majority-language schooling?

For example, Professor Vaillancourt and his associates calculate that, in Alberta, French-language university education costs $23,359 per full-time student, and English-language university education $16,684. Consequently, the *extra* cost is $6,675 per student. Since there are some 592 students registered in French-language studies, the total *extra* cost to Alberta taxpayers is almost $4 million a year (p. 16).

Although the logic is plausible, the calculations are spurious. In the first place, the cost for French-language university education is only $18,144 rather than $23,359. How is this error possible? The latter figure is not, in fact, from Alberta. The authors claim that they "were unable to obtain information on the cost of a student attending [the University of Alberta's French-language] Campus Saint-Jean" (p. 16). Consequently, they took New Brunswick figures and applied "a 40% mark-up" to that province's differential.

In the second place, the data for English-language university education is seriously compromised by the inclusion of Athabasca University, a distance-education institution, where the cost is only $4,300 per full-time student. A more appropriate comparison would be the University of Alberta alone, where the cost is $19,852. Or better still, the University of Alberta's English-language Augustana Campus, where the cost is $28,782. Regardless, these figures lead us to the same conclusion. In Alberta, minority-language university education is *cheaper*, not more expensive, than comparable majority-language university education. For taxpayers, there is a net *saving*, not a net cost.

Should this saving be deducted from the alleged costs of other bilingual services? The authors don't think so; they make no allowance for this possibility. They set negative costs at "zero." In Quebec, where minority-language education (in English) is found to be cheaper, they simply conclude that "there are no extra costs associated with anglophone minority students" (p. 67).

This is only one example and – as a long-time professor at the University of Alberta's Campus Saint-Jean – I obviously did not choose it at random. Should I also do other meticulous recalculations before passing judgement? Probably. But a complete verification would be very time-consuming process; it is beyond the scope of a simple book review. In any case, a single example is sufficient to fully expose serious methodological flaws.

Presumably, the authors' Campus Saint-Jean analysis is atypical and they do not usually take unjustifiable shortcuts, fabricating figures instead of recording data. Nevertheless, it casts a revealing light on a faulty but widely-held assumption, i.e. that French-language education is inevitably more costly to taxpayers than English-language education.

In 1892 the North-West Legislative Assembly established English as the only language of instruction in publicly-supported schools and, as a consequence, terminated government subsidies for French-language education. In Alberta, this situation continued without significant change until 1968, when the provincial government agreed to finance bilingual schools if they limited French-language instruction to 50% daily. A more important policy reversal occurred in 1994, when the province gave full and formal recognition to French-language schools and French-language school boards.

For more than a century, then, French-language education was subjected, at best, to chronic and punitive underfunding. Any attempt, no matter how feeble, to repair this injustice inevitably requires new government spending. But these expenditures can never counterbalance the permanent devastation that successive governments inflicted on the minority-language population and its schools, purportedly in an effort to save money and eliminate costs.

English-language costs, however, not French-language costs, are the Achilles heel of this research study. As the Campus Saint-Jean example illustrates, the authors have failed to apply appropriate controls. Athabasca University is a distance-education institution; Campus Saint-Jean is a full-service institution. The former is English and the latter French, but structure – not language – explains the observed cost differentials. In short, without control variables, it remains moot as to whether minority-language services cost money or save money.

As regards schooling, potential control variables might include: academic programs, support services, physical plant, community outreach, catchment area, territorial location, population density, transportation systems, and foundation date. Although methodologically feasible, the collection of this data would be onerous.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding its pretentions, this study does not evaluate the *benefits* of official bilingualism. It is, however, as rightfully claimed, the first attempt "at systematically measuring and comparing these provincial costs" (p. 109). In many respects, the effort seems commendable. And if extreme caution is exercised, the results are serviceable. Regrettably, caution and wisdom are in short supply, and the authors, blissfully unaware of methodological shortcomings, make unwarranted interpretations and reach unsubstantiated conclusions. If the subject matter and the policy implications were less significant, perhaps this might be tolerable. But not when these distortions are used to mount a barely-disguised attack on constitutionally-protected minority rights.

The costs and benefits of official bilingualism are legitimate and, indeed, vitally-important subjects for scholarly study. But the field has fallen into academic disrepute, abandoned to political propagandists. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council would not likely provide funding; the Fraser Institute – a private organisation that promotes free enterprise – has stepped into the breach. Maybe this explains the blind emphasis on costs and the wilful neglect of benefits.

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