

The Two Official Languages and the Economy: A Manitoban Perspective

Source : DELOITTE & TOUCHE, Winnipeg, Jean-Paul Gobeil

Introduction

"Central. Bilingual. Competitive. Manitoba, The Call Centre Location." That was the gist of an advertisement that appeared on page 1 of the "Report on Telecommunications," a special section of the English-language national newspaper *The Globe and Mail* in March 1995. This is a message that would not have been identified, a few years ago, as coming from Manitoba—especially in English. For, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the merits of Manitoban bilingualism were argued before the courts, from the Manitoba Provincial Court to the Supreme Court of Canada.

The Manitoba advertisement is, however, an interesting point of departure for embarking on a consideration of the official languages and the economy, the topic of this colloquium organized by Official Languages Support Programs and the Strategic Research Directorate in the Corporate and Intergovernmental Affairs Branch of the federal Department of Canadian Heritage. For, by linking bilingualism to economic benefits, the Manitoba advertisement highlights one of the positive aspects of official bilingualism in Manitoba, not only for the Francophone minority but for all Manitobans.

According to the colloquium organizers, "the objective of the exercise is to explore, in the Canadian and global context of the end of the 20th century, the relationship between the two official languages and the economy." The purpose of this paper is somewhat more modest, namely, to examine the Manitoban situation in light of a recent study on economic development in bilingual municipalities in Manitoba, in order to attempt to identify opportunities for mediation and facilitation by the federal government in this area.

Background: bilingualism in Manitoba

As everyone knows, Manitoba joined the other four provinces of Canada as a bilingual province in 1870. Fifteen years later, as a result of massive immigration from Eastern Europe, linguistic duality was no longer a demographic reality. In 1886, French speakers constituted only 10.3% of the province's 108,640 residents. Twenty years after the creation of Manitoba, official bilingualism (legislative assembly and courts) was abolished with the adoption of the provincial *Official Language Act*. In education, religious schools were replaced (1890 to 1896) by public schools where a language of instruction other than English could be used. In 1916, bilingual schools were abolished and public schools were, in theory at least, English schools.

In other words, from the end of the 19th century until the 1980s (and still today) bilingualism in Manitoba has had a negative connotation. For the multi-ethnic majority, bilingualism is a costly irritant that it would like to see disappear. For the Francophone minority, it is a constant struggle focusing on linguistic and cultural survival. In this context which is unfavourable to the normal development of an individual and his local community, it should come as no surprise that the socio-economic portrait of Manitoba's Francophone community today differs substantially from that of the Anglophone community. It would be correct to say that any government intervention in terms of language and the economy must take this difference into account.

Francophone Manitoba: a demographic portrait

To understand the demographics of Manitoba, it should be noted that over half the total population (56.5% in 1991) lives in Winnipeg, the provincial capital. One should also keep in mind that urban growth occurs in large part at the expense of the rural regions, a phenomenon that dates back to the post-war boom. The Manitoban Francophone community is no exception to this

demographic reality and is, in fact, essentially urban. In 1991, two thirds of Franco-Manitobans lived in Winnipeg, while one third lived in villages or rural municipalities. Close to 90% of Francophones live either in Winnipeg or less than an hour from the Manitoba capital.

The bilingual rural communities are, to say the least, small, just as Manitoba, in relation to Canada is small (4% of the population of Canada in 1991). Among communities belonging to the *Association des municipalités bilingues du Manitoba* (AMBM), the largest incorporated village is Sainte-Anne-des-Chênes (pop. 1,477; 59.2% Francophone), located some 40 minutes from Winnipeg. The other incorporated member villages have less than 1,000 inhabitants. As for the rural municipalities, they have larger populations. However, being rural, the population density is lower, except in the unincorporated villages, which have very little local autonomy. And in some cases, the percentage of Francophones is less than 50%.

In Manitoba, erosion of the rural population toward urban centres follows the demographic trend seen Canada-wide. Among the four incorporated villages in the AMBM, only two have had a population increase from 1986 to 1991. The same can be said of bilingual rural municipalities: the farther they are from the provincial capital, the greater the loss of population. Half of the municipalities belonging to the AMBM have had an increase in population from 1986 to 1991; the other half has seen a net loss of population during this period. The absence of local economic growth, and hence of jobs, is the main reason for this depopulation. French Manitoba: an economic portrait The tertiary sector clearly dominates Manitoba's economy (see Table 1). The main industries in the service sector are retail trade, transportation, finance and public administration. The secondary sector comprises various manufacturing or processing industries. It includes 1,800 firms employing over 63,000 persons and producing goods worth more than \$6 billion annually. As for the primary sector, it includes agriculture, hydroelectricity and natural resources (mining, forestry and fishing).

Table 1: Economic portrait of Manitoba, by sector

Economic Sector	Percentage of jobs		
	Manitoba (total)	Non-Francophone municipalities outside Winnipeg	Bilingual municipalities outside Winnipeg
Primary	9%	7%	40%
Secondary	19%	20%	0%
Tertiary	72%	73%	60%

While non-Francophone municipalities located outside the metropolitan region reflect, to within a few percentage points, the provincial trends (Table 1, column 3), this is not true of bilingual municipalities in Manitoba (Table 1, column 4). Francophone communities located outside the metropolitan region disproportionately depend on the primary sector, in comparison to the provincial average. In addition, Francophone presence in the primary sector is limited almost exclusively to agricultural operations.

With regard to the tertiary sector, social and health services are going through great expansion in bilingual communities where the population is increasingly an aging one. These services account for approximately 15 to 20% of jobs. Educational services are also significant. Between 20 and 25% of jobs in these communities are in the retail sector. It is essentially made up of businesses that cater to people living in these communities. Little income is generated from sales to clients from outside respective communities.

French Manitoba and economic development

The relationship between languages and the economy existed in French Manitoba well before the adoption of the federal *Official Languages Act* and its related promotional programs. The *caisses populaires* and the co-operative movement have promoted a type of economic development in Franco-Manitoban communities since 1938. The 18 *caisses populaires* with 10 branches and three outlets in 29 Franco-Manitoban communities had, as of December 31, 1993, 35,600 members with total assets of \$355.5 million. The Franco-Manitoban co-operative movement also has nine co-operatives belonging to the *Conseil de la coopération du Manitoba*, regrouping 6,000 members and assets of over \$16.6 million.

In the 1970s, the *Société franco-manitobaine* (SFM), the provincial organization of Manitoba Francophones, had on its staff at least one economic development officer responsible for encouraging and supporting groups that wished to form investment clubs or launch businesses. Chambers of commerce and business associations have been active to varying degrees, depending on the people involved and the decade in question.

Despite the efforts of all these groups, the need to increase economic development was still considered a priority at the end of the 1980s. In 1989, a *Bureau de développement économique provincial*, funded by grants from Department of the Secretary of State, was set up under the direction of the *Conseil de la coopération du Manitoba*. While the Bureau has set up several exchange visits and identified possible Quebec firms interested in setting up shop in Manitoba, results were rather meagre.

How is it that the *caisses populaires*, founded without assistance and without government programs, are still an economic force today in the Francophone communities of Manitoba, while recent efforts supported by public funds (almost exclusively from the federal government) almost never produce the expected results? That is a question that may clarify one aspect of the relationship between languages and the economy.

In response, it could no doubt be pointed out that the economy was not (and still is not) part of traditional Franco-Manitoban "culture." Community values and the occupational training received did not prepare Francophones to succeed in the business world. In the 1970s, the *Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface* (CUSB), the only French-language post-secondary institution in Western Canada, developed its faculty of education to meet the needs of training teachers for French-language and French immersion schools. A technical and professional school was established at CUSB in the 1980s. However, it was only in 1995 that CUSB could announce the establishment of a specialized undergraduate program in business administration.

Compartmentalization of the language

Lack of preparation for the business world does not explain everything. It does not account for the success of the *caisses populaires* in Manitoba and for the fact that the Francophone farmer, mechanic, grocer or real estate agent succeeds as well as his Anglophone counterpart.

The beginnings of an answer lie in the change over time in the perception of the Francophone community and of the language. As noted previously, Francophones in Manitoba quickly became a minority in the late 19th century. However, before the post-war boom and exodus from rural areas, Francophone communities, both in rural areas and in Saint-Boniface (the only really urban Francophone centre in Manitoba), were fairly homogeneous. The *caisses populaires* were therefore locally founded for economic needs and not for linguistic reasons. They operate in French because they were established by Francophones for Francophones, who make up the vast majority of inhabitants in most of the parishes and villages.

With modernization of the province and improvement in transportation and communications networks, these parishes and villages emerged from their isolation and became more and more linguistically mixed. The reorganization of local institutions—principally consolidation of small schools—often brought language quarrels and the survival mentality among Francophones out into the open. It is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of economic development when the legitimacy and existence of essential institutions such as French language schools are being called into question. All the energy, and often all the resources were spent on survival of language and culture; all initiatives were directed to that end.

This had the effect of circumscribing what might be called "Francophone affairs." Community involvement, even the career choice of a true Francophone was restricted to the Francophone sphere (parish, school, cultural activities). Municipal council, chamber of commerce and community associations activities serving the needs of both Francophones and Anglophones were sometimes conducted in French and in English, most often in English only, and therefore became secondary. Within the Francophone leadership, French became an end in itself instead of a means of reaching an end. The federal *Official Languages Act* and programs to assist official language minorities reinforced this frame of mind. This assistance was (and still is) important for the establishment, maintenance and operation of Francophone institutions essential to a quality of life in French. However, as long as it is limited, or gives the impression of being limited to the Francophone sphere, it can only maintain, often artificially, perceptions and realities that must be left behind.

The future: decompartmentalization and opening up

The future of Francophone communities in Manitoba and in Canada depends in large part on the economic future they fashion for themselves. To derive full benefit from the situation, it will be necessary to decompartmentalize (and depoliticize) the language issue, not only in federal and provincial departments and governments, but also within the general population.

The study we carried out for the AMBM has shown that despite the comparative advantages of Manitoba (central geographical location, access to North American markets, efficient telecommunications system, etc.), New Brunswick has had greater success in attracting companies by further capitalizing on its bilingual work force. In New Brunswick, both among Francophones and the non-Francophone majority, there is a strong consensus on the economic benefits of bilingualism, while up until recently in Manitoba, bilingualism was a concern of the Franco-Manitoban minority and in economic terms served mainly as a tourist attraction.

While our analysis has shown that bilingualism in itself is not sufficient to attract businesses and is not a decisive factor in location for all sectors of the economy, the availability of a bilingual work force in Franco-Manitoban communities provides them with a uniqueness and is a distinguishing feature that governments ought to be more aware of and of which they should take more advantage.

The benefits of greater promotion of the "bilingual" fact by governments are obvious:

- it could change many peoples' attitudes to bilingualism were it presented as an important asset rather than an unnecessary expense;
- the joint efforts of Francophone and non-Francophone communities to attract businesses to Manitoba could promote harmony between these communities;
- attracting businesses to bilingual communities would change their economic profile and make them less dependent on the agricultural sector.

Opportunities for mediation and facilitation by the federal government

Promotion of the economic benefits of bilingualism by governments will not, in itself, be sufficient. Communities and governments must also adopt a new "culture," a new way of seeing and doing things with regard to languages. The Francophone sphere cannot be viewed, both locally and nationally, as isolated from the economic and social realities in which we live. Bilingualism must not be a separate issue; it must be an important and vital element of all issues and programs. Bilingualism must take its rightful place within these programs, whether they be the Western Diversification Fund or development of the electronic highway, and be seen as an economic asset rather than simply wishful thinking. The Department of Canadian Heritage might therefore act as a "broker" for assistance programs, facilitating and providing official language communities with real access to various assistance programs.

This also means that the Department of Canadian Heritage and the official language communities must rethink their ways of doing things. In the past, the federal government has provided the bulk of its assistance to Francophone minorities in the political and cultural areas. While this focus was probably essential during the 1970s and 80s (there was some serious catching-up to do), and while it produced positive results, this type of assistance has serious limitations. It does not provide any economic lever to communities and groups receiving it. It lacks flexibility: projects submitted are designed to meet criteria established by Ottawa rather than real local needs. Is there not a current need to reverse the equation, that is, to invest in Francophone economic development in order to allow the business environment to then reinvest in its artistic and cultural organizations—in other words, enabling the community to reinvest in itself? To this end, the federal government must also move away from what might be called the principle of national conformity, of national criteria imposed on everyone, regardless of local realities.

As we have mentioned before, with only 4 % of Canada's population, Manitoba does not have much influence. Bilingual communities in this province are small. Some people might easily ask: why do anything for so few people? Indeed, why? Because Franco-Manitoban communities are the only ones in Manitoba that already have French-language institutions (schools, cultural associations, etc.) that make Canadian bilingualism real, concrete and possible. Because Franco-Manitoban communities already have a bilingual workforce, and that is something that cannot be developed overnight. Because in today's context we cannot allow ourselves to underutilize the assets and skills of each and every person.

Conclusion

Bilingualism has never had a good reputation in Manitoba. However, the Manitoba government increasingly seems to realize the economic advantages of bilingualism and seems to be ready to say this publicly. Among Francophones, a new "culture" is beginning to develop; the French language is increasingly seen as a means of improving not only one's personal situation but also the situation of one's municipality, village, province and country. Both Francophone and Anglophone municipal officials have traditionally kept their distance from linguistic issues. Today, as members of the *Association des municipalités bilingues du Manitoba*, they have shown that they really want to participate in the economic growth of their community and that bilingualism is a factor that gives their community a great advantage for this growth.

This realization by bilingual municipalities is only one element in the formula for success. The federal government still has a vital role to play. But this role must change. It must recognize that it cannot impose from on high what people are not prepared to do for themselves locally. It must show greater flexibility in its criteria for access to programs. It must also be prepared to target some of its assistance to economically gainful organizations so that they may, in the long term, reinvest in their own community. Finally, it must ensure that bilingualism is part of all government programs.