

# **Speaking Notes for Senator Tardif**

## **Languages Without Borders**

### **Opening Address**

**May 21, 2009**

### **Check against delivery**

Distinguished guests, government leaders, teachers, administrators, trustees, leaders of numerous local and national organizations, dear friends, *chers amis*

Good evening, *Bonsoir, Buenas noches, Guten abend, Dobri vetchir!*

It is a great pleasure for me to be here this evening in my home city of Edmonton to open this important national conference for second language educators.

*Je tiens à remercier très sincèrement les organisateurs de cette conférence pour leur aimable invitation de vous adresser la parole ce soir.*

My congratulations to the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers and the Institute for Innovation in Second Language Education at Edmonton Public Schools, for co-hosting this important conference, and to all of you who have come together for this conference - from across Canada and around the world - to attend and participate these next few days. As an educator, I want to say that I recognize and admire the important work that you carry out as teachers, administrators, policy-makers and dedicated friends of second language teaching and language learning in Canada.

It is in no small part because of your work and dedication that Canadians and Canada as a nation are able to stand tall and proud in the world based on its policies of official-language bilingualism and its policies on multiculturalism.

I have had the privilege over the years, in my work as a teacher, professor, researcher, administrator and more recently as a Senator in the Canadian Senate to see first hand the positive effects of bilingualism and multilingualism for our young people and for our society. I agree with Richard Pound when he states: “You cannot fully understand Canada in only one language”.

*Depuis 40 ans, le Canada joue un rôle de leadership dans la promotion de l'apprentissage d'une deuxième langue par ses programmes de français langue seconde,*

*d'immersion française et d'enseignement de langues additionnelles.*

*La dualité linguistique et la diversité culturelle sont deux traits caractéristiques qui rendent la société canadienne unique, et qui ont mené à la création d'une société qui reconnaît et respecte les différences.*

Given its history of multilingual educational opportunities and the cultural and linguistic plurality that exists today, Edmonton is an appropriate venue for this conference.

Edmonton is at the forefront of promoting second-language learning in the newly opened Institute for Innovation in Second language Education at Edmonton Public Schools, providing international language accreditation, training and support of teachers and

administrators, access to resources and research information, and various services to promote second-language learning.

Both Edmonton Public Schools and Edmonton Catholic Schools have a long and very proud history of groundbreaking second language education. French Immersion programs were established in the early seventies and continue to be successful along with their excellent French second language courses. Today, Edmonton Catholic Schools and Edmonton Public Schools offer bilingual programs in several languages and second-language courses in seven to ten languages, in addition to the French programs. For example, Edmonton Public established Meyonohk Elementary School, a bilingual English-Mandarin program, some 27 years ago – and it

continues still today. As well, both school boards offer a first rate English as a Second Language program. Once again, my sincere congratulations for the leadership shown in promoting second language education!

The theme of this conference is “Languages Without Borders.” What an amazing idea – that language, once the hallmark of separations between nations and people, now has become a path to enable us to transcend divisions.

As educators who teach second languages, we know, very concretely, the power of shared languages to dissolve barriers and build mutual understanding, respect and friendship. Not always, of course – but when it happens, it is a joy to behold. The relief on a child’s face, when she

realizes her words are understood. The joy when two young people from different backgrounds discover that they can speak with each other.

There is a well known Czech proverb, “Learn a new language and get a new soul.” Each language that we speak deepens our understanding of the rich complexities of the extraordinary world we inhabit. It is a window – a door, more like – to understanding a culture, a history, an outlook on the world. It allows us to touch the experiences of others, in ways that speaking through an interpreter, however skilled and well-intentioned, never can.

The great Nelson Mandela said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

We are living in extraordinary times. I know – many of us sometimes wish they were a little less extraordinary. We are witnessing at once the truly unprecedented gathering-together of people all across the globe, as technology and travel allow us to ignore the many miles that divide us, and permit us to communicate instantly with friends, colleagues, businesses and customers half a world away. No sooner have we learned to email, but now we are expected to learn to “tweet”. And we are also witnessing the counter-force, the pulling inward of some to protect their traditions, beliefs and way of life against what they see as a threatening incursion.

We need strong bridges of understanding and respect among people and nations. Those bridges begin not with

**concrete**, but with **shared language**. This, in my opinion, is the true infrastructure our world needs today!

We here in this room are very aware that knowing a second or third language is much more than knowing words or grammatical structure.

*Apprendre une autre langue c'est s'ouvrir à un autre monde et aux possibilités qu'offre ce deuxième monde.*

*Connaître une autre langue c'est avoir accès à la culture des gens qui parlent cette langue. Voilà le premier pas vers la compréhension et le dialogue.*

That is your gift to students. Yes, you are giving them a foundation on which they will be able to move in our global economy. You are equipping them for success in ways

never imagined by our parents and grandparents. But you are also doing much more. You are giving them new eyes to see the world around them, and new ears to hear the conversations of generations. You are giving students a vastly enriched life.

We each gain, as well, as teachers, as citizens and as a nation.

Our ability to move in the global economy is strengthened immeasurably. The world today is in a recession – but I don't think anyone doubts that when we emerge – indeed, in order to emerge – we must be ready to seize opportunities around the globe. India, China, Europe, South America, Asia – the potential is real, and our young people today are eager to go out and blaze new paths.

This generation is better prepared than any before it to succeed in the new economy. They are smart, sophisticated, open to new ideas, technologically savvy – and they are fearless about moving into the larger world.

They have grown up surfing the Internet, exploring sites from across the globe interchangeably with those from their own home town.

What is the key that our children and students need, to realize the potential of their global dreams? **Language.**  
**Without doubt, it is language.**

Here in Canada, we begin with a tremendous advantage. We have a tradition of respect for cultural and linguistic diversity that is the envy of countries around the world.

We have a long and proud history of encouraging Canadians to learn both our official languages. According to the 2006 census, the proportion of Canadians reporting that they are able to conduct a conversation in both English and French has increased to 17.4%. Meanwhile, with the exception of Nunavut, every province and territory across Canada offers French immersion programs, as well, of course, as French language instruction.

This is excellent, and we have much reason to be proud. However, these programs are not equally accessible by all. And that brings me to another, very important aspect of the theme of this conference. “Languages without borders” also, in my opinion, raises the issue of the **barriers** that exist in too many of our communities that

make it difficult for students to access French and other language training.

Right now, too many young Canadians cannot take the French language courses they want, whether because there simply aren't enough qualified teachers in the area, or because of enrolment caps or admission criteria, additional fees or because it's just too expensive to transport someone in a rural community to a school where the program is offered, to name just a few of the barriers that currently exist in our communities.

Another barrier identified in a recent report by Canadian Parents for French The State of French-Second-Language Education in Canada 2008 is that currently many ESL students are being excluded from French-due to lack of

English language knowledge at the time of entry to the school. Considering that two-thirds of Canada's population growth is coming from immigration, it would be beneficial for these students to profit from the benefits of official-language bilingualism in Canada. In my mind, all these barriers represent a failure of our educational and political systems.

Language skills provide a competitive advantage to our citizens as they move in the global marketplace. It makes no sense to build or maintain barriers that impede our young people from acquiring these skills. "A culturally pluralistic society encourages learning languages, which are an essential feature of it"(Kilgour, p.2). It is time for us as Canadians to be linguistically ambitious. The debate should not be whether we learn French in school. It

should be, “Do we learn not only English and French, but Spanish, too, or maybe German, or perhaps Mandarin or Japanese as another?”

I know, some people say that in the current economic times, we can't afford to put more money into language training. I say, in these economic times, we can't afford not to make that investment. Language training is as fundamental to equipping our young people to succeed in the global knowledge economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as math, science, literature – any discipline you could name.

2009 marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passing of the *Official Languages Act* by the Parliament of Canada. This is a very significant milestone.

*Cette année la Loi sur les langues officielles célèbre son 40<sup>e</sup> anniversaire. Reconnaissons cette étape importante dans le développement de notre pays par un engagement renouvelé pour l'enseignement des langues secondes.*

*Plus que jamais, nous devons redoubler nos efforts pour assurer la place qui revient à l'enseignement des langues dans un programme scolaire. Trop souvent,*

*l'enseignement des langues n'est pas considéré prioritaire par les administrateurs et les dirigeants de conseils scolaires, ce qui contribue à des conditions de travail moins qu'idéales pour les enseignant(e)s, ainsi qu'à une pénurie de ressources humaines et matérielles.*

*Engageons nous aussi à fournir les ressources financières nécessaires pour permettre à tous nos jeunes au Canada la possibilité d'apprendre les deux langues officielles de notre pays.*

I realize that education is a matter of provincial responsibility, and I have no intention whatsoever of encroaching upon that. As citizens, as communities, provinces and as a nation, I believe we must work to ensure that all Canadian students have the right to learn both of Canada's official languages, whether they live in one of our urban centres or our rural communities.

Let us press our federal and provincial government leaders and school boards to make second language education a mandatory part of the curriculum across the country. There is much variation from province to province, from region to region, from municipality to municipality. This lack of a coherent national language policy hinders our youth from the opportunity of becoming

bilingual and in many cases trilingual. As I have emphasized repeatedly, it is key for all levels of government to increase their commitment to second language education. Learning multiple languages is not only of individual benefit, but it benefits our society and our world. As citizens and educators we have a civic responsibility. We must not hesitate in continuing to advocate for the need for second language learning and additional languages. We are challenged to a new vision – a vision that places the value of language learning within a knowledge-based global context.

I believe that second language education – especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – should be a core Canadian value. As a country, we undervalue language education. We have led the world with our French immersion programs – let us

lead the world with our continued commitment to second language training for our young people.

And as language educators we know that knowing a second language makes it much easier to learn a third – or a fourth, or perhaps even a fifth! The European Union’s language policy promotes multilingualism and has set a goal for every EU citizen to speak at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue.

We have another advantage in Canada, namely the extraordinary diversity of our population. The 2006 census counted almost 6.3 million people in Canada who speak a language other than English or French. That is virtually one in every five people.

The Canadian mosaic is truly the mosaic of the world. We stand positioned to move with confidence wherever our opportunities, curiosity or passions lead.

But we cannot be complacent. We cannot assume that because our population is drawn from around the globe, that this will in itself give future generations the tools they need to move easily throughout the globe.

We need you – our teachers, policy-makers, administrators, parents and students – to keep our rich linguistic heritage alive and thriving for all generations, and for all Canadians – those who seek to uphold the language of their parents and grandparents, and those who want to explore new worlds.

Bilingualism was the challenge of the last century, and we still have numerous barriers to tear down to achieve our vision and our possibilities. I agree with John Ralston Saul when he states that it is disappointing to see that Canada has not yet normalized bilingualism. But bilingualism, I believe, is no longer enough. If Canada is to be a leader on the world stage, we need to make multilingualism our goal for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That is how we can best serve the next generations of Canadians.

I will conclude with a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein, the German philosopher. He said, “The limits of my language are the limits of my universe.”

You have my firm commitment as an educator, parent, friend, and now in my work as a Senator that I will

continue to work with you to urge the Government of Canada and Ministries of Education to ensure that all students in Canada have equitable access to French second language education and to additional language learning opportunities as well as the necessary financial resources that meets the needs of the communities in a coherent and visionary framework for action.

On behalf of my colleagues in the Senate of Canada, I wish you a productive, exciting and inspiring several days.

Thank you. *Merci de votre attention et bon congrès!*