

Celine Cooper: Revitalizing Quebec's English-speaking community



CELINE COOPER, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

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Is it too late to revitalize English-speaking Quebec?

This was the barn-burner of a question animating a public research panel I took part in last week. The event was organized by Paul Zanazanian of the Department of Integrated Studies in Education (DISE) at McGill University and Lorraine O'Donnell of the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN) at Concordia University. I shared the panel with Liberal MNA for D'Arcy-McGee David Birnbaum, Diane Gérin-Lajoie from University of Toronto, Cheryl Gosselin at Bishop's University and Marie McAndrew from the Université de Montréal.

Moderated by Zanazanian, the panel was asked to reflect on three questions: What is English-speaking Quebec? Are there any threats to the community's vitality? What can or should be done?

No surprise, debate from the floor was hot and heavy. Also no surprise, the evening left me with more questions than answers.

A strange (or maybe not?) confession: I've always felt a bit apprehensive about being referred to as a member of Quebec's English-speaking community. Part of this unease surely has to do with the fact that while my first language is English, I'm not a member of the historically rooted English-speaking community in this province. I moved here 10 years ago. I didn't live through the social, economic and political ruptures of the Quiet Revolution and beyond. The mass exodus of anglophones in the 1970s and '80s didn't have an impact on my family. These events aren't a part of my

history or experience.

Maybe because of this, my primary investments in community-building are not to maintain or reproduce English spaces where people can live and thrive apart from French-speaking Quebec. Even as I recognize their importance and contributions, I don't see English institutions as central to my identity, community or culture in Quebec.

I approached the McGill panel with a few key questions in mind: Who is invested in the revitalization of English-speaking Quebec today, who isn't, and why?

For many English-speaking Quebecers, reviving the English community of days gone by isn't at the top of their priority list. This doesn't mean they don't care about their communities, just that they approach them differently.

Take education, for example. Many parents who could send their kids to English schools are walking away from the English school boards and deciding to send their kids to the French system or private schools instead. Many say that English schools — despite their success with higher graduation rates — are not doing as well in preparing their children for the realities of life in French-speaking Quebec.

How can we address this issue in a way that contributes to community revitalization?

Here's an idea: What if influential members of the established English-speaking community sought out francophone counterparts and threw their collective weight behind bilingual schools? Not only would French and English students receive the benefits of immersion in both languages and daily interaction with each other, bilingual schools in which anglophones and francophones are partners would allow anglophones a measure of control over schools that would produce graduates who would be more likely to stay in Quebec.

I'm not naive. I know there are huge legal and political obstacles to such a proposal. But that doesn't make it impossible.

So, is it too late to revitalize English-speaking Quebec?

If the goal is to revive a historic minority community of anglophones capable of regenerating apart from the francophone majority, then my answer is yes.

On the other hand, if the goal is to embrace a changing and fluid English-speaking community, then no, it's not too late. But I think the answer lies in a willingness among the established anglophone community (and the francophone community) to take risks, welcome ideas that may destabilize institutionalized notions of language and community, abandon or overhaul institutions that may not reflect the priorities of new generations of English-speakers in Quebec, and focus on building new ones that do.

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This column has been updated to add the names of the event organizers and moderator.