

First steps forward for anglophone affairs secretariat

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The newly created provincial secretariat for anglophone affairs held a day-long forum at Concordia University in Montreal on Feb. 16 with representatives of anglophone community groups across the province, with the goal of creating an action plan for the new provincial body.

Minister Responsible for Relations with English-speaking Quebecers Kathleen Weil, Secretary for Relations with English-speaking Quebecers Bill Floch and MNA David Birnbaum listened as anglophones spoke about their concerns and hopes for the secretariat.

The secretariat was officially created in late November 2017, and its representatives have hit the ground running. Floch explained that its first two mandate areas are to liaise with community organizations serving English speakers



Photo by Ruby Pratkan

Minister responsible for relations with English-speaking Quebecers Kathleen Weil addresses media with MNA David Birnbaum on Friday in Montreal.

around the province and to develop a statistical profile of the English-speaking community. “We’re trying to work on those areas early, because they can lead to a kind of diagnostic which can help us be more effective,” said Floch. The secretariat also intends to advise other branches and levels of government on the needs of

English-speaking Quebecers, and to eventually help the community develop and fund needed programs.

For Weil and Floch, the forum was the latest stop in a series of consultative visits around the province. Attendees came from as far away as Rouyn-Noranda and the Magdalen Islands. They ex-

pressed concerns about keeping young people in the province, ensuring access to government programs including employment services, health and social services and French second language training, representation in the civil service and better support for English-speaking Quebecers living in poverty, as well as official recognition for anglophone Quebec cultural industries and funding for community groups.

Recent statistics reveal that the stereotype of the wealthy anglophone is increasingly inaccurate. According to the secretariat’s own statistics and statistics from the Department of Canadian Heritage, 13.6 per cent of anglophone Quebecers live in poverty, compared to just over eight per cent of francophones, and 9.4 per cent of anglophones are unemployed compared to about seven per cent of francophones. Many participants, including Floch

himself, expressed concerns about keeping younger and more educated anglophones in the province. “Upward mobility for anglophones has become outward mobility,” Floch observed.

Others spoke about the need for improved social services for vulnerable anglophones. “There is still a lot to be done with regard to access to services in English in many regions, especially mental health services in English [without] having to wait ridiculous times,” said Jennifer Johnson of the Community Health and Social Services Network. “Our seniors and young children are also vulnerable, and need ... funding for more and better programs.”

Although the secretariat has its work cut out for it, participants seemed satisfied with the forum. “For the first time I feel like we’re moving forward and not pedalling in the mud,”

said Sharleen Sullivan of Neighbours, which serves the English-speaking population of Rouyn-Noranda.

“Whenever you get that many people from across the province representing so many different organizations representing the English-speaking population, that is a great thing, and it was very constructive,” said Voice of English-speaking Québec board member Ed Sweeney. “Right now we can’t really think long term, we have to see what will happen during the next election ... [but] I believe that this government believes the English-speaking population is part of the solutions to the challenges all Quebecers face.”

Weil said she planned to hold consultations in the Quebec City region as well as in the Gaspé and on the Lower North Shore, but dates have not been set for those events.