

Re: La Francophonie

Lessons from France: How English in the U.S. might benefit from international advocacy

Report by Gerda Bikales

Though I can hardly say it without a chuckle, my French acquaintances assure me that there is nothing funny about the word "francophonie," a term coined in 1880 by an obscure geographer wanting to denote the totality of people and countries utilizing the French language in some fashion. Today it is a serious word applied to a serious purpose, which French people readily understand and approve.

Watching in anguish as English steadily forged ahead to become the world's foremost international language, France has not stood idly by. Starting in the sixties, the French government undertook a series of counter moves to hold the line on the erosion of French around the world. In 1965, it signed a bilateral accord with Quebec, making teachers of French available to the Province. The following year,

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a high level commission for the defense of French was chartered, and a year later an international association of French-speaking parliamentarians was launched. The push for a still stronger international organization for the defense of French came largely from the newly independent African states, anxious to preserve the language of their colonial past as a bridge to the modern world and to one another, and wishing to see its prestige restored. In response to these concerns, the High Council for *la francophonie* was created in 1984, and held its first summit meeting two years later, attracting representatives from 41 countries.

Bureaucratically, *la francophonie* was initially given a very visible presence within the office of the Prime Minister, then attached to the Ministry of Culture. The Government of President Jacques Chirac transferred it recently to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where it enjoys a quasi-autonomous sub-cabinet status of considerable importance. The move to the ministry of Foreign Affairs is significant: language is perceived as a component of French foreign policy.

La francophonie has evolved a three-pronged mission that is clear, widely known and readily

accepted by the French public. It is, first and foremost, to expand the reach of the French language across the world. A related objective is the creation of conditions favorable to the development of the French culture and civilization wherever. Finally, it is the vehicle for promoting a sense of solidarity among all French speaking countries, rewarding them economically and politically for their loyalty. So successful have the French been in keeping their former colonies in the French camp that the President of Benin, host of the sixth summit held in his country last December, chided President Chirac for France's insufficient adherence to *la francophonie*. This pique brought a promise from the French president, who at times has been known to slip into fluent English, that he will soon issue an executive order mandating that all cabinet members traveling abroad speak French in public.

The importance of *la francophonie* was underlined by the presence at the summit of the French president, who came despite a series of crippling strikes that paralyzed his country. Jean Chretien of Canada was there, and so was the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. The summit was a fine opportunity, of

course, for the head of that troubled organization to court votes in his re-election bid among the countries in attendance. But should he be unsuccessful in his quest for a second term as Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros-Ghali need not worry about his future employment: the delegates decided to create a Secretariat of *la francophonie*, to be headed by a Secretary-General and based precisely on the United Nations model. The well-known French-speaking Egyptian diplomat would appear to be the ideal candidate for this position.

The Benin summit admitted its forty-ninth member: Moldavia, formerly part of the Soviet Union, now an independent republic. Rumania and Bulgaria, former Eastern bloc countries in which French survived the imposition of extensive Russian language teaching, are full members. Poland, once very much in the French camp, has probably drifted too far into English to join up. Quebec is a member, *naturellement*. But so is New Brunswick — and so is the Canadian federation itself. Louisiana has acquired observer status.

Long-term planning on the

future direction of *la francophonie* is carried out by the aptly-named “committee for reflection,” which urged the rapid development of a competitive position for the French on the new information highways. France, an early leader in the computer revolution, has seen its advantage dissipate, in part because the field has progressed in English. The English language dominance in electronic communications is decried as a threat to cultural diversity, a threat to which *la francophonie* is pledged to respond with substantial investments to make the electronic highway more accessible and friendly to French-speakers.

While francophonie summitry has played out on an international scale, France has not neglected the interests of the French language at home. In 1992, taking no chances on any internal challenge to the supremacy of French, the constitution was amended to declare that “the language of the Republic is French.” Further elaboration of this principle was enunciated by law in 1994. Recently, in a move to counter the popularity of English-language songs, radio and television stations have been

ordered to devote forty percent of their music programs to songs in French. None of this has created much of a fuss. Unlike America, where any attempt to give a measure of legal protection to the national language is greeted with hysterical denunciations and predictions of an imminent fascist take-over, the need to protect the French nation’s language is self-evident to its people.

There may be some useful lessons for Americans in the history of *la francophonie*, especially in the wake of several court rulings that endanger the various state and local laws protecting English as the common language of the U.S. Just as France’s former colonies in Africa and Indochina have found it productive to pressure their formal colonial masters for the protection and promotion of French, so the former British colonies in North America in which English is under serious challenge may benefit from pressuring England to take the lead in the creation of an aggressive international body for the defense of English. Sri Lanka, India, and perhaps other countries where the cementing role of English has come to be appreciated, may wish to join North America in lobbying Her Majesty’s government for such an organism. For no one in the English-speaking world — no, make that no one in the world — can benefit from a United States and Canada decimated by the assault of competing languages.

Anglophonia, anyone? □

Beware of Those Who Advocate Population Growth

“It may appear to be the interests of rulers, and the rich of a state, to force [i.e. rapidly increase] population, and thereby lower the price of labor, and consequently the expense of fleets and armies, and the cost of manufactures for foreign sale; but every attempt of the kind should be carefully watched and strenuously resisted by the friends of the poor, particularly when it comes under the deceitful garb of benevolence...” — Thomas Malthus, 1798

(Our thanks to Timothy Gawne of Silver Spring, Maryland for drawing our attention to this quotation.)

See the following article about Congress and population by Roy Beck.

Federally Coerced Population Growth

House votes to add 130 million in 50 years

Analysis by Roy Beck

WASHINGTON — Given a chance to slow down the third-world-style population growth in the United States, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 238 to 183 on March 20 to continue a legal immigration level that would double U.S. population over the next century.

The roll calls on that and 14 other immigration-related issues March 18-20 offered Americans a rare look at the stances, values and commitment of U.S. representatives on issues of environmental protection, population growth and fairness to wage-earners. (The Senate had not yet acted at publication time.)

Once current legal immigration volume was endorsed, the House voted 333-87 for legislation that would strengthen many efforts at curbing *illegal* immigration.

An analysis by THE SOCIAL CONTRACT of the overall records of each of the 435 members of the House revealed complex patterns of voting. Neither party earned the gratitude of the majority of Americans who want the federal government to stop forcing population growth. Yet, both parties also produced a small minority of their members who were true champions of population stabilization and of the

Until three years ago not a single member of the House would even introduce legislation to cut legal immigration. Now a near-majority of 183 representatives have voted for such a reduction.

American worker.

- There were 16 representatives who voted consistently on the side of reduced population growth and reduced importation of foreign competition to American workers. (See box of "16 Top Leaders For Immigration Cuts.") Of that select group, 10 were Democrats and 6 were Republicans..

- The votes of 51 other members could be considered to have been, on balance, supportive of cuts in population growth and foreign labor importation. (See box of "Other Leaders For Cuts.") Republicans were dominant in this group, outnumbering Democrats 41-10.

- On the other end of the spectrum, 71 representatives consistently voted for higher population growth and more importation of foreign workers. (See box on "71 Consistent Voters For High Immigration, Population.") They came from 30 states and were predominantly Republicans (55 of them).

- The voting records of the nearly 300 other representatives were mixed. Many voted against cuts in legal and illegal immigration but also opposed efforts to increase the importation of temporary workers. Others voted just the opposite. On balance, the voting records of all of them would keep immigration levels high.

Most Important Vote On Legal Numbers

Lamar Smith (R-Texas) had bulldogged an immigration bill through his own subcommittee and then the House Judiciary Committee that would cut both illegal and legal immigration. Heavy lobbying

Roy Beck is Washington editor of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT and author of The Case Against Immigration: The moral, economic, social, and environmental reasons for reducing immigration back to traditional levels, released by W. W. Norton & Company this spring. (See ad inside the back cover.)