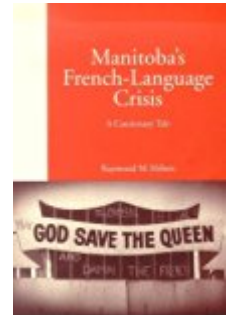


**Raymond M. Hébert.** *Manitoba's French-Language Crisis: A Cautionary Tale.*  
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**Reviewed by** Matthew Hayday

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In the late 1970s, many English-speaking Canadians were outraged at Quebec's Bill 101, the *Charte de la langue française*. This piece of language legislation, passed by the Parti Québécois, restricted the use of English on public signs in the province, limited access to English-language education, and took numerous other steps to ensure the primacy of the French language in Quebec. The legislation was immediately subject to legal challenges from groups who argued that Bill 101 violated the constitution. Amidst the maelstrom of media attention dedicated to the future language rights of Quebec's anglophone and allophone populations, a second, potentially more devastating legal challenge to Manitoba's language laws was threatening the legal legitimacy of the Manitoba government itself, yet these events received comparatively little media attention outside of Manitoba and Quebec. A unilingual parking ticket issued to Georges Forest in 1975 would result in over a decade of legal wrangling, hostile parliamentary gamesmanship, and outright racism in Manitoba before cooler heads eventually prevailed.

*Manitoba's French-Language Crisis* is the long-awaited book adaptation of the Ph.D. thesis of Raymond Hébert, professor of political studies and Canadian studies at St. Boniface College, University of Manitoba. Hébert explores the responses of a diverse group of actors to a key pair of constitutional challenges--the *Forest* and *Bilodeau* cases--which targeted the legitimacy of Manitoba's 1890 *Official Language Act*, an act which rendered the province unilingual, despite provisions of the 1870 *Manitoba Act* mandating a level of bilingualism in Manitoba's legislature and courts parallel to that of Quebec. He seeks to explain the responses of four Manitoba governments--those led by Ed Schreyer, Sterling Lyon, Howard Pawley, and Gary Filmon--to these court decisions, as they attempted to devise solutions that would preserve the legitimacy of Manitoba's laws and legislature while responding to court rulings that deemed the 1890 Act unconstitutional. The thrust of the court decisions on the *Forest* and *Bilodeau* cases was that all legislation and government regulations passed solely in English since 1890 were invalid. The primary focus is the period from 1983 to 1984, when the NDP government led by

Howard Pawley attempted to broker a compromise solution with the federal government, Roger Bilodeau, and the Société franco-manitobaine (SFM). These efforts would be met with hostility and parliamentary shenanigans from the Sterling Lyon-led Conservative opposition that eventually shut down the legislative assembly for twelve consecutive days in February 1984, before the NDP caved in and prorogued the legislative session.

Hébert's book is the first major scholarly account of the 1980s language crisis in Manitoba, a welcome addition to the journalistic accounts of Jacqueline Blay's *l'Article 23* (1987), published in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, and Frances Russell's recent book *The Canadian Crucible* (2004). It provides a reasoned counterpoint to the highly biased *The Battle over Bilingualism* (1985) by NDP MLA and anti-bilingualism crusader Russell Doern. While Blay and Russell primarily rely on journalistic accounts of the events of 1983-85 to explain the Manitoba language crisis, Hébert had access to the personal papers of Premier Pawley, Attorney-General Roland Penner, French-language services coordinator Roger Turenne, and the lawyers for the SFM. He skilfully uses these documents to reconstruct the drama of the peak years of the crisis, granting his readers a view of the intense negotiations which proceeded behind the scenes, while not neglecting the high-profile rhetoric of the public forum that has been chronicled by others. Hébert writes from the perspective of a "participant observer" as a Franco-Manitoban who lived through the crisis (and who has worked directly in the community both as a journalist and as the head of the Bureau de l'éducation française). His sympathies clearly lie with the advocates of bilingualism, but his account is generally evenhanded in its treatment of both advocates and critics. Indeed, French-language crusader Georges Forest and SFM lawyer Joseph Magnet receive their fair share of criticism for their roles in the crisis.

The crux of the debate over the French language in Manitoba in the early 1980s was whether, faced with court decisions that Manitoba had acted unconstitutionally in eliminating the status of the French language in 1890, the government should ignore the ruling; translate every single piece of legislation that had been passed since 1890 (at a cost of millions of dollars); or seek a constitutional amendment that would permit Manitoba to avoid such a translation burden, offering concessions such as increased French-language government services to the Franco-Manitoban community as a quid-pro-quo for this reduced translation load. The Lyon government attempted to follow the first path when faced with the *Forest* decision. The Pawley government attempted to follow the third, but ran into massive opposition from both the Conservative opposition and various grassroots organizations that denounced bilingualism and painted the SFM as an illegitimate interest group funded by Ottawa.

In tracing the progression of this crisis, Hébert has deliberately attempted to provide what he describes as a "narrative history," rather than explaining these events through a theoretical framework. Earlier versions of this work employed an "authoritarian personality" theoretical framework to account for the backlash against French-language rights and services in both the legislature and the general population. Hébert has removed most references to this theory from his book, with the exception of the final two chapters, in which he puts forth this theory as an explanatory framework. The overall impact of this approach is somewhat unsatisfying.

As a narrative, *Manitoba's French-Language Crisis* is a compelling read, peppered with insights into the hypocrisy and bigotry of the rhetoric of Sterling Lyon—the "fire-breathing, anti-Trudeau, Charter-loathing" villain of Hébert's story (p. 71). These elements are well developed through the main narrative, which is then coherently explained by the framework in the conclud-

ing chapter, which places Lyon in the role of the authoritarian dictator. The motivations and approaches of other organizations, such as Grassroots Manitoba and the Union of Manitoba Municipalities, which weighed in against the constitutional amendment in the fall 1984 municipal referenda, are less well developed. Hébert's application of his theoretical framework to these groups--essentially arguing that they blindly accepted and repeated the opinions of Lyon and other Conservative heavyweights, rather than logically analyzing the bilingualism proposals of the Manitoba government--at the end of the book feels tacked on and is insufficiently fleshed out. Likewise, the virulent anti-bilingualism of the provincial Conservative caucus and the diverse groups allied behind their cause may indeed be the result, as Hébert posits, of a cohort of Manitobans, predominantly descendants of Orange Ontario settlers, who feared that their symbolic status in the province as Manitoba's "in-group" was being challenged by a reemergent bilingual Manitoba with a new elite (pp.209-211). However, the evidence to support this theory needed to be more explicitly developed throughout the narrative.

While the case can be made for attempting to provide the reader with a complete and objective narrative, unencumbered by theoretical arguments, it is frustrating to know that there existed a theoretical approach that could have been used to explain these events, but that this was weakly presented in the final product. Hébert argues that in the wake of postmodernism, "a growing number of authors are opting for approaches that allow more room for the reader to develop his or her own analysis" (p. xii). My sense is that this work would have been more dynamic and would have provided a more substantial contribution to historiographical debates if the original line of argumentation had been left intact, permitting subsequent scholars both to benefit from Hébert's expertise and to challenge his interpretations as they saw fit.

Nevertheless, Hébert has written a compelling account of the political struggle over bilingualism in Manitoba. His book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the history of francophone minorities in Canada, and to our understanding both of the political history of Canada's provinces and of the role of the courts in the Canadian political system. The events of the bilingualism crisis in Manitoba are an important element of the story of federal efforts to promote official languages in Canada, and a crucial episode in English-French relations in Canada. Manitoba has been a key, but understudied, player in recent Canadian political history in the debate over official languages and Hébert's book will be a key resource to scholars interested in these questions.

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