

**International Association of Language Commissioners' VIth Annual
International Conference**

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Ontario Ombudsman**

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Good morning everyone.

We acknowledge we are hosted on the lands of the Mississaugas of the Anishinaabe, the Haundenosaunee Confederacy and the Wendat. We also recognize the enduring presence of all First Nations, Métis and the Inuit peoples.

It is my honour to welcome you to Toronto – capital of Ontario, Canada's largest province, and home of the new champions of the basketball world, the Toronto Raptors.

It's a pleasure to see you all here today. You know, for as long as I have had a career, whether in the practice of law or as an ombudsman, I have been grateful to be able to attend conferences like these, and have always benefitted from them immensely.

In addition to learning from the significant information presented in plenary sessions or workshops, I have always found it reassuring to meet with colleagues from other jurisdictions, with similar passions and objectives, and learn that the challenges I face from time to time are not unique to me.

I always come away from conferences not only invigorated and energized from interaction with fellow professionals who share my passion, but armed with strategies and ideas for optimizing my performance and that of my organization.

By sharing best practices, we learn about, among other things, effective strategies to enhance governance by promoting transparency, accountability, fairness, and respect for citizens' rights.

I am confident this conference will be no different, and that we will all gain a broader perspective on the issues we face in protecting linguistic minorities, as well as ideas that will allow us to contribute to the building of stronger societies by promoting fairness, tolerance, and respect in our various jurisdictions.

So please take advantage of the opportunity to network, solidify existing relationships, and by all means, build new and productive ones that will optimise your powers as an agent of positive change.

I look forward to learning a great deal from our expert panellists and speakers, whom I hope to count as colleagues by the end of the conference.

It is an enormous privilege to find myself hosting this particular conference, at this particular time in Canada and Ontario. It is not something that I, or anyone in this room, would have foreseen eight months ago. But in many ways, it could not be more fitting.

As the newest member of the IALC, I have now officially been part of the language commissioner world for just over seven weeks. But I have also been an ombudsman for many years. And I believe strongly in the power of our work to bring constructive change to public institutions, to speak for the interests of citizens, and to ensure they are fairly and equitably served.

To have some of the foremost language commissioners and ombudsmen gathered here in my province to share strategies and best practices is, for me, the best of all possible worlds.

In November, we learned that the responsibilities of the French Language Services Commissioner and the investigative function of the Child Advocate would be transferred to our office as of May 1.

It is a matter of public record that this news was as much a surprise to us as it was to the communities served by those officers. Once the legislation passed in December, it was up to us, as public servants, to ensure that the public would continue to be served.

Our priority was to ensure that service to the people of Ontario would continue uninterrupted; that calls would still be answered, complaints would still be heard, and investigations would still be pursued, without disruption and with the same level of expertise, through May 1 and beyond.

That initial transition is now completed, and our new French Language Services and Children and Youth units are operational. We are now setting our sights on taking advantage of the newfound strengths and opportunities that come from our combined skills, mandates and resources.

Those seeking the help of the French Language Services Commissioner, for example, now have access to all the resources of the entire Ombudsman's office – and its influence. There may be language cases that the Commissioner was unable to tackle in the past, which can now be examined under the Ombudsman's broad mandate – which includes municipalities and boards of education. And there will certainly be issues that will benefit from the Ombudsman's proven model for conducting systemic investigations to promote constructive change.

Our next priority will be to recruit a full-time French Language Services commissioner who will work within our office to engage the community and address issues proactively. We officially began the process of conducting a Canada-wide search for candidates this week.

I also look forward to the discussions at this conference about the various roles of language commissioners versus ombudsmen, and how they promote minority rights. In my latest Annual Report, which I released yesterday, I discussed the many ways in which our office has worked proactively for the rights of Ontarians, particularly vulnerable populations.

For example:

We helped inmates who were being held in inhumane conditions.

We helped disabled and homeless people obtain health coverage.

We helped people with developmental disabilities find placements when they could not be cared for at home.

We helped refugees get driver's licences after their identification was taken away by border agents.

And we helped Indigenous inmates who had no access to cultural services that the province had committed to provide.

These kinds of results – along with almost 45 years of experience in recommending improvements to make provincial services work better – are what we will build on, as we take on the new challenge of protecting minority language rights, with the expertise of the French Language Services staff who were transferred to our office through legislation and now make up our new unit.

They are the people who are responsible for bringing you all here today, and I want to recognize the tremendous work that they have done to make this event a reality, through a tumultuous year. This conference is a testament to their dedication and professionalism and their passion for this work. It is one of the many reasons I am so honoured to have my office take on this role, and why I am confident we can do so effectively, together.

As I have told them, and I can tell all of you today, even though these events were not something any of us expected, they have presented all of us with the opportunity to help more people than ever before. And that, in the end, is why we do what we do.