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Notes for an address to the Annual General Meeting
of the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers

Vancouver, British Columbia
September 25, 2008

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Mister Eskine, Madame Thibault, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to start off by thanking you for welcoming me here today to speak to you. CASLT and the Office of the Commissioner have always had an excellent working relationship and I look forward to our continued success together.

Presently in Canada, French as a second language programs continue to be a hot commodity. As a bilingual country, Canada has a great need for such programs. They ensure that all Canadians are given the opportunity to learn both official languages. Of course, we are not limited to English and French. As demonstrated by your presence here today, many other language programs are also thriving throughout the country. And these many languages continue to open new doors for our youth.

All of us here today are passionate about language learning. And we must keep up this momentum and build on our past achievements. As you discuss the next steps for the future of your organization, I invite you to also reflect on the following questions:

1. How can we build on the success of second-language programs?
2. How can we encourage students to continue their studies in these programs?
3. And finally, how do we ensure that second-language programs continue to be relevant?

I'm not pretending to have all the answers, but I hope to give you some insight into the particularities of the Canadian situation.

1. Present situation

CASLT plays a key role in the language education of our children. Its members are responsible for reaching the majority of second-language students through core and intensive French programs. This, in itself, is no small task. Since the very beginning of your organization, you have proven yourselves as leaders in the field. And you continue to be leaders through your involvement in projects such as the Common Framework of Reference for evaluating second-language competencies.

Also, I want to congratulate you on the work you have done at the national level with the FSL Partners Network—a network on which my office sits as an observer. Such a united voice on the national stage gives decision makers and the general public a greater awareness of the benefits of learning both official languages. Your teachers are pioneering programs such as intensive French. Through your work, most of our children are being offered the opportunity to learn Canada's second official language and culture.

Despite the high level of interest we have witnessed in the past year, there are still some issues that must be addressed if we are to achieve increased proficiency in both official languages in the near future.

At a conference organized by the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute at the University of Ottawa last June, I touched on the role of diversity and multilingualism in our society. In light of current Canadian trends, both of these issues also have an impact on your work, as student learning styles will vary and will continue to evolve as our population changes.

In order to keep second-language learning relevant, we must address these issues and continue our studies on the matter without delay.

2. Realities of core and intensive French programs

I often worry that unilingual parents see FSL programs as a system that produces perfectly bilingual graduates, and as the one and only way to learn French. These expectations are both unrealistic and counter-productive. Let me explain.

In immersion programs, emphasis is on oral abilities, sometimes to the detriment of writing skills. In core and intensive French programs, students will have repeated opportunities to practice grammar and verb tenses, but may continue to struggle orally.

As ambassadors of the French language among the English majority community, teachers have one of the most difficult jobs in the teaching world. They must use the little time they have with students so that these students leave with as much knowledge as possible.

With the support of CASLT, teachers have demonstrated their commitment to continually improving FSL programs in order to better respond to student needs.

In these challenging times for FSL programs, I look to our teachers to continue to persevere, and to continue to work as ambassadors and defenders of the French language. As front-line professionals, they are the ones who are best suited to advocate for increased support—not only from all levels of government, but also from both the majority- and minority-language communities.

Finally, and most importantly, they must ensure that their students have opportunities to learn beyond the classroom. Even in British Columbia, universities like Simon Fraser and the University of British Columbia are now offering French diploma programs. In this way, the extra investment that teachers make ultimately pays off, in that students are compelled to pursue higher education in their second language.

3. Partnerships with minority-language communities

French-language minority communities are present in all provinces and territories, although their sizes may vary. During my experiences conversing with FSL students, I often found that these youths were not always aware of the presence of minority-language communities outside Quebec—despite the fact that these communities can play a vital role in their learning process, and be a source of support for FSL teachers.

As you all play a key role in FSL education, I encourage you to look to these communities for the tools and support you need to build on existing programs, and to increase the relevance and exposure of FSL programs.

I continue to express the need for Canadians to better understand their own country. To do so, it is important that they have a better knowledge and understanding of both our majority- and minority-language communities. To accomplish this, Canadians must understand the language as well as the culture. Even back in 1957, before the *Official*

Languages Act, before the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the issue of knowing the other's culture was already being discussed. Nathan Cohen, host of the CBC radio program *Fighting Words*, hosted a discussion with René Lévesque, Pierre Elliott Trudeau and others about whether a country could be enriched by the coexistence of two cultures if one-half of the population could not appropriate the other half's cultural product.¹ Over a decade later, I had the privilege of working with Mr. Cohen, and we know what the future held for his panellists!

While preparing to speak to FSL students, parents and teachers at a French for the Future event in London, Ontario earlier this year, I learned that the city has a thriving Francophone population with its own community centre and radio station. I found that several big names in French-Canadian music, among others, had passed through the city. But I was saddened by the fact that few FSL students were taking advantage of the services being offered and the cultural events taking place.

Our two communities live side by side, often intertwined within the same city. The days of the two solitudes should be behind us. The days where we worked against one another are certainly behind us. Today, we must show that we are united towards the same goal: bilingualism, or at the very least, an understanding of the other's language and culture.

All across the country, Francophiles have shown their appreciation for the French culture by participating in cultural events in large numbers. Francophone communities are not private clubs where only "true" Francophones can join. They form communities open to all those who love the French language. More and more, Francophiles are playing influential roles in these communities. Probably the most well-known example is that of Tory Colvin, who was president of the *Fédération des associations de juristes d'expression française de common law*. Justice Colvin is now a judge to the Ontario Court of Justice. Anglophones who have learned French also play a key role in the *Association des juristes d'expression française* across the country.

4. Diversity

We are also seeing changes in our communities' demographics, in terms of diversity. Immigrants have also carved a place for themselves within the French community.

Of course, the issue of diversity affects both language communities in Canada, and presents an even greater challenge for teachers of second-language programs. Newcomers in Canada often have one or two languages under their belts before setting foot in the country, which means that English and French tend to become their third and fourth languages.

It is therefore our responsibility to ensure that the programs we offer respond to their particular needs as well. We must ensure that these children and their parents understand the reasoning behind English and French as languages of emphasis in our schools.

¹ Proposition discussed by panelists on CBC Radio's weekly discussion program *Fighting Words*, November 12, 1957, hosted by Nathan Cohen. As noted by Morris Wolfe in *Fifty Years of Radio* (1986), the panelists were broadcaster René Lévesque, teacher Raymond Gagnier, writer Solange Chaput-Rolland and *Cité Libre* magazine editor Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

We must clearly demonstrate that there exists a mutually beneficial relationship between diversity and linguistic duality, and that these two elements are not working against each other.

Conclusion

It has never been Canada's goal to make all its citizens bilingual, nor is there a need to do so. But in this global economy, the opportunity to learn other languages is in itself an advantage. It opens doors to so many options throughout the world. In Canada, learning English or French can be stepping stones not only towards bilingualism—but towards multilingualism as well.

Although not all students of second-language programs will continue with their language training, they will have at least been given the basics needed to appreciate the language and the culture that accompanies it. And you are all to thank.

I look forward to hearing the outcome of your discussions, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how to ensure the continued success of second-language programs while also ensuring that these programs remain relevant for all students.

Thank you.