

Francophone Immigration to Atlantic Canada

Brief from the Société Nationale de l'Acadie to the Standing Senate
Committee on Official Languages



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Introduction

The Société Nationale de l'Acadie (SNA) is a non-profit organization based in Moncton, New Brunswick. It is made up of the four francophone advocacy associations and the four francophone youth associations in Atlantic Canada: New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador. Its associate members include Acadian associations from Quebec, Ontario, the United States and France. For more than 140 years, the SNA has been representing the Acadian people on the Atlantic, national and international stages and consulting with Atlantic Acadia on common issues.

One of the characteristics that distinguishes the SNA's mandate from other organizations representing francophones across the country is that it represents the Acadian people internationally. Since 1968, the SNA has maintained formal relations on behalf of the Acadian people with the governments of France and Belgium as well as the states of Maine and Louisiana. The SNA carries out various initiatives related to these international relations, including a youth mobility service, a service promoting Acadian artists and initiatives promoting francophone immigration.

In 2009, the SNA created the Atlantic Committee for Francophone Immigration (CAIF), a consultation mechanism that brings together Atlantic francophone immigration stakeholders in order to build on regional strengths; promote exchanges, partnerships and resource-sharing; work on common issues and speak with a unified voice. The CAIF regularly consults with its immigration partners in the four provinces. Its most recent forum on the issue was held in December 2021. Some of the data and recommendations in this brief stem directly from those recent discussions.

Although it is not a member of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada (FCFA), the SNA fully supports the FCFA's recommendations in the report *Faire le point sur la cible en immigration francophone : bilan, enjeux et pistes d'action*.

Immigration in Atlantic Canada

It is an understatement to say that francophone immigration is essential to the vitality of Atlantic Canada's francophones. The declining birth rate, out-migration, population aging and linguistic assimilation can only be countered by an increase in the French-speaking population, which must come from immigration.

In many cases, essential services for the linguistic minority are at stake, since these services are directly related to the number of people who are supposed to benefit from them. Yet immigration's contribution to Atlantic Acadia remains well below what is needed.

“Francophone immigrants to Atlantic Canada represent about 7% of all immigrants in Atlantic Canada, a higher proportion than in Canada outside Quebec, which is 3%. It is higher (15%) in New Brunswick, but less than 4% in the other Atlantic provinces. These immigration rates do not reflect the demographic weight of the francophone population of New Brunswick (32%) or of Atlantic Canada (11.9%).”ⁱ [translation]

The governments of the four Atlantic provinces are aware of the importance of francophone immigration for their linguistic minority communities and have each, in their own way, adopted a francophone immigration plan in addition to clearly expressing their desire to work with community organizations, especially through the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP). **New Brunswick** is aiming for francophone immigrants to make up 33% of its total population, while **Nova Scotia** has not proposed a target but says it wants to increase francophone immigration to the province. **Prince Edward Island** was aiming for six francophone immigrants per year over a five-year period, and **Newfoundland and Labrador** broke new ground in 2017 by clearly quantifying its francophone immigration effort and announcing that 50 spots would be reserved for francophones in its PNP. Despite these good intentions and recent increases in immigration rates, notably in Nova Scotia, no province has yet reached its target—far from it.

The governments of the four Atlantic provinces must work harder in order to carry out concerted initiatives to promote, recruit, integrate and retain francophone immigrants. Francophone immigration to Atlantic Canada must have a regional approach in order to promote the unique culture of Acadia.

The 4.4% target for Atlantic Canada

As the Commissioner of Official Languages points out in his *Statistical analysis of the 4.4% immigration target for French-speaking immigrants in Francophone minority communities: Almost 20 years after setting the target, it is time to do more and do better*, “The 4.4% target for French-speaking minority immigration was adopted in 2003 to stem the decline in the demographic weight of the French-speaking minority population, which was 4.4% in the 2001 census.”

However, nearly 20 years later, the demographic weight of francophones in Canada outside Quebec, particularly in Atlantic Canada, has continued to decline, while the 4.4% target, which was pushed back to 2023, has never exceeded 2% (this was the case in 2019).

Some of the figures put forward by the Commissioner of Official Languages in this same study speak for themselves: between 2001 and 2020, the four Atlantic provinces received between

36.0% and 38.4% of the number of francophone immigrants needed to reach the 4.4% francophone immigration target, which is insufficient to counteract the decline in the demographic weight of francophones.ⁱⁱ

To put the 4.4% target in perspective, between 2011 and 2016, “Francophone immigrants in Atlantic Canada accounted for only 2.3% of all immigrants arriving in Canada ..., the lowest proportion in the country.”ⁱⁱⁱ [translation]

The reality in Atlantic Canada

The Atlantic region presents a unique immigration challenge, regardless of the immigrant’s language: 75% of immigrants arriving in Canada prefer to settle in urban areas, a more limited option in Atlantic Canada. This reality is further complicated by the remoteness of major centres such as Toronto and Montreal and by a much more limited multiculturalism. Francophone immigrants face an even greater challenge because newcomers are expected to speak English as well or, at the very least, to be able to learn it quickly in order to integrate successfully.

The challenge for Atlantic francophone communities is therefore twofold: **to attract** and to **retain** immigrants. A great deal of effort has been made in this regard. “Since the mid-2000s, much progress has been made, particularly with regard to implementing specialized French-language services for immigrants, a marked increase in international promotion activities, awareness-raising among host communities, the consolidation of stakeholder consultative bodies and greater government commitment.”^{iv} [translation]

The necessary mechanisms are in place, provincial governments are willing to work with their francophone communities to increase francophone immigration, and the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship is active with francophone communities, sponsoring, among other things, the work of the Atlantic Committee for Francophone Immigration (CAIF) and the Francophone Immigration Networks (RIFs) in each of the four provinces.

Reversing the trend

So why isn’t francophone immigration increasing? And how can we solve this? It’s clear many occupational, economic, social and cultural reasons are behind this. Newcomers may have unrealistic expectations before arriving in Canada or face difficulties settling or integrating. And clearly detrimental administrative and governmental realities affect immigration rates.

The difficult journey of international students

“International students represent a skilled, Canadian-educated immigrant class, which allows them to avoid credential recognition problems, thereby removing a significant barrier to immigrants’ willingness to settle permanently. In addition, their integration is facilitated by the

years spent in the region during their studies.”^v [translation] In the Atlantic region, it is estimated that non-permanent residents, many of them international students, account for about one-third of francophone immigration, and this figure could be much higher.

The experience of the CAIF and other organizations involved in francophone immigration, as well as the experience of Atlantic post-secondary institutions, is that these students’ applications for study permits are very often denied. The lucky ones who obtain this permit and complete their studies in our institutions face similar problems a few years later when they decide to settle in Atlantic Canada and apply for permanent residence, which is very often denied as well.

Recommendation

That the federal government immediately examine why applications from francophone international students are rejected and aim to increase the number of applications that are approved.

Obtaining permanent residence

International students are not the only ones who have to persevere to obtain permanent residence. Almost all categories of immigrants experience this. The requirement to leave Canada to submit the initial application is a particularly complicated barrier for prospective immigrants.

As the Commissioner of Official Languages notes, “The IRCC’s 2012 and 2017 evaluations point to the need to develop more mechanisms to facilitate the granting of permanent residence in Francophone minority communities.”

Recommendation

We urge the federal government to quickly identify ways to facilitate the permanent residence of francophone immigrants in minority communities.

Credential recognition

“Interviews found that the difficulty of fully exercising professional activities for which they have been trained is a source of frustration and one of the main barriers to economic integration,” said researchers from the Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities.^{vi} [translation]

This is not a new problem, but it has never been fully addressed. In the Atlantic study conducted for the SNA and the CAIF by the Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities, more than a third of immigrants surveyed (36%) said that they were not exactly, or not at all, working in their field of expertise.

As this is one of the issues examined by this committee, we would like to mention that the CAIF is currently working on a feasibility study on credential recognition for French teachers, a field in which the need for teachers is very acute.

Recommendation

We ask that the federal government take immediate action by working with professional associations to facilitate the recognition of the credentials and work experience of francophone immigrants.

Francophone diplomacy

The Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship cannot carry out francophone immigration activities in a vacuum—they must be linked to a robust francophone diplomacy strategy.

Diplomacy is the best tool we have to collectively promote Acadia as a great place to live, where it is possible to have a successful business and where one can undertake quality studies in French. It is because of its diplomatic relations with France that Acadia has a Consulate General of France. The consulate is an essential tool in attracting European immigrants to Atlantic Canada.

Unfortunately, the government has not grasped the importance of this great opportunity. In 2003, the government eliminated the Public Diplomacy Program, which enabled the SNA to promote Acadia internationally, and never reinstated a comparable program.

We therefore urge the federal government to reflect on the issue of francophone immigration within a broader perspective of international relations and to immediately commit to developing a francophone diplomacy strategy that will support the new francophone immigration policy.

The SNA is already taking action in this regard, for example by promoting sister cities, decentralized cooperation, international mobility for young Acadians, and Acadian artists on the international stage.

Unfortunately, the federal government does not recognize the ability to conduct international activities as a source of development and growth for the Acadian people. Yet we strongly believe that it is this very ability to conduct diplomatic activities that makes our Acadian communities open to the world and that empowers the Acadian people to attract and integrate a greater number of immigrants. Diplomatic and immigration activities must interconnect.

Recommendation

We recommend that the government develop a diplomatic strategy for the francophone community that is aligned with strategies for promoting francophone immigration. We recommend that this strategy be developed by, for and with Acadians in order to provide the Acadian diplomatic corps with the tools to carry out their work.

English language training

In the Atlantic region, with the exception of a few very specific cases, such as the francophone town of Caraquet in New Brunswick, newcomers cannot fully integrate into the larger community without some command of the English language. Yet “the last three censuses seem to indicate that recent immigrants with French as a mother tongue were less bilingual when they arrived in the Atlantic region than in the past. For example, more than a quarter (29.9%) of francophone immigrants between 2011 and 2016 did not know enough English to carry on a conversation after less than five years of permanent residence, compared with 19.4% of francophone immigrants between 2006 and 2011 and 24.4% of francophone immigrants between 2001 and 2006.”^{vii} [translation]

In the hope of integrating and retaining francophone immigrants in the Atlantic region, it is imperative that English language training be more widely available to francophone newcomers. It’s worth noting that becoming bilingual does not seem to negatively impact their use of French, as indicated in the study by the Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities cited above: “Half (52.3%) of francophone immigrants in the Atlantic region spoke French most often at home in 2016, a quarter (24.6%) spoke their non-official language most often, while 15.0% spoke English most often, and 8.1% spoke English and French equally. The longer they lived in the region, the more likely they were to speak French, or English and French, most often at home instead of just English alone or their non-official language. This shows a trend toward French even in private, even though French is a minority language in the Atlantic region.”^{viii} [translation]

Recommendation

That the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship help its community partners in Atlantic Canada facilitate English language training for francophone immigrants.

Conclusion

The Atlantic francophone and Acadian community, which we represent, believes that francophone immigration is a key driver of its population growth. It works toward this goal and intends to continue its work to the best of its ability. Our organizations are connected to the existing and immigrant community, the expertise is there and the SNA, the CAIF and their

members and partners are ready to work with the federal government to implement the recommendations that we have put forward in this brief.

We hope that this brief and its recommendations will help the committee and, ultimately, the federal government revise its approach to francophone immigration and reverse the assimilative targets of the past.

i Traisnel, C., Deschênes-Thériault, G., Pépin-Filion, D. and Guignard Noël, J. (January 2020), *Attirer, accueillir et retenir. La promotion, le recrutement et la rétention des nouveaux arrivants francophones en Atlantique*, Moncton, New Brunswick: Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities [AVAILABLE IN FRENCH ONLY].

ii Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (November 2021), *Statistical analysis of the 4.4% immigration target for French-speaking immigrants in Francophone minority communities: Almost 20 years after setting the target, it is time to do more and do better*, Figure 8, page 44.

iii SNA, "Compte-rendu du 5^{ème} colloque sur l'immigration francophone en Atlantique," October 2021.

iv Traisnel, C., Deschênes-Thériault, G., Pépin-Filion, D. and Guignard Noël, J. (January 2020), *Ibid.*

v *Ibid.*

vi *Ibid.*

vii *Ibid.*

viii *Ibid.*