My name is Madeleine Léger, and I am a philosophy student at Mount Allison University, which is located about 30 minutes away from the University of Moncton. This is not far in geographical terms, but the gulf between these two institutions can be vast in cultural terms. This reflects the reality in New Brunswick.

Two peoples coexist in a small province of just over 700,000 inhabitants. We share not just the only officially bilingual province in Canada, but also our cities and villages, our media and hospitals, our cultural centres and highways. We live together in this province, and sometimes we find it a little too small.

As a francophone student at an English-language university, my situation is perhaps atypical, but not at all unique in New Brunswick. I grew up in Fredericton, a mostly English-speaking city, but I attended École Sainte-Anne, which was the only French-language school in the provincial capital at the time. From kindergarten to Grade 12, I had the enormous privilege of spending my days with people who spoke the same language as me. We were surrounded by French-language books, music and resources. Not every francophone in my province has the same experience.

In 2015, I chose to pursue my post-secondary studies at Mount Allison not because I was tired of thriving in my native language, but because this university offered me unparalleled opportunities, including a high-quality philosophy program. It was very difficult to set aside my mother tongue, the language I had used in the first 18 years of my education, to continue my studies in English.

Yet when I arrived at Mount Allison, I saw the true strength of New Brunswick’s francophone community. I expected a sudden immersion into English, but instead I discovered a group of students who came from various parts of Acadia. I found friends from Fredericton while developing relationships with students from Dieppe, Tracadie, Grand Falls, Shediac and Campbellton. We ended up in Sackville having taken different paths, but we all had something in common: our love for our language. All of us brought that love with us when we first started university.

I also discovered the importance of cultural exchange. As a francophone, but also as a bilingual New Brunswicher, I firmly believe that bringing my province’s two main linguistic communities closer together is essential to the survival of French in Acadia. I put this principle into practice every day. Once a week, I host a French-language radio show on the airwaves of the university radio station. While I host the show in English, all the music I play is in French. The goal is to make my culture accessible to all students, especially those who do not speak French. I became editor-in-chief of a bilingual publishing house on campus. I also sit on a committee to encourage students to have conversations in French, no matter the difficulty level. All these activities are intended to build bridges between the province’s linguistic communities. I am convinced that the only way to improve linguistic relations in New Brunswick is to forge links between these communities, which sometimes have trouble communicating with each other.

I inherited this conviction from my parents. My father is an Acadian who passed on the legacy of his clever and determined people. Thanks to him, I have deep roots in Acadia. However, my love for my homeland was equally fostered by my mother, an Albertan born to a
German father and an anglophone mother. My mother chose to make Acadia her home and her homeland. Because of her choice, I speak French today. Her decision to raise me in French gives meaning to the expression “mother tongue.” So my love for my language and my culture came as much from my anglophone mother as from my francophone father.

Those are the broad strokes of my background, which helped form my beliefs about our country’s official languages.

I believe that the question of official languages in Canada has little to do with genes and a lot to do with our cultural contexts, as well as the lessons we learn from our communities and our willingness to foster a greater understanding of our neighbours. Of course, heritage matters, but I do not believe for a second that our family history must dictate the languages we can come to speak and love. Moving forward, we undeniably must do a better job of understanding each other, of opening our hearts and minds to realities that are not our own.

I do not claim to have found a panacea for our country’s linguistic challenges. In my last few minutes, I will attempt to offer some of my personal observations regarding our people’s official-language needs.

From my perspective as a student, the answer is clear: education must come first. As a province, as a region and as a country, we must provide high-quality primary, secondary and post-secondary education to all those who want to learn in French. In French-speaking areas, this would require a significant investment of time and resources to accommodate a growing francophone population in urban centres. In my hometown of Fredericton, two new French-language schools have opened their doors in the past decade owing to high demand.

In English-speaking areas, we must immediately start promoting French immersion programs and making them a priority. I truly believe that the key to harmonious bilingualism lies in this cultural exchange, starting at a young age. Immersion programs are not currently available in all schools. Those who have the opportunity to enter an immersion program have trouble maintaining their second language after graduation. These programs should underline the importance of French-language literature, music and culture—no one falls in love with the rules of grammar, after all. We learn to love a language by speaking it and learning it in its cultural context.

At the post-secondary level, we must never stop building on the foundation established by those who came before us. We must continue investing in the University of Moncton, the veritable heart of the francophone community in the Maritimes, but we must not forget Sainte-Anne University, New Brunswick Community College and all the other institutions that offer a French-language education in the region. We must take action to ensure all students, including those who have adopted French as a second language, can choose to study in the field of their choice in French.

As for those students like me who choose to attend an English-language institution, I would hope that they can do so knowing that francophone communities and networks will follow them. Whether in the form of an academic department of French, cultural activities, community centres or educational resources, French can play a role in a unilingual English-language institution.

Of course, we cannot discuss French in Acadia without mentioning our distinctive dialects. In Acadia, French does not belong to the Academy on the other side of the Atlantic. Our language has developed in its own way and survived many journeys. It currently reflects our
unique character, our vitality and, above all, our perseverance. Acadians debate the value of standardized speech, with some arguing that adopting impeccable French is vital to the survival of our culture. Others say that our way of speaking, whether it is the Chiac dialect, old French or simply our collection of unique expressions, is an amazing part of our identity. I fall into the second group. I firmly believe that preserving French in Acadia requires preserving *Acadian* French.

Finally, I want to point out that the languages discussion in Canada cannot end with the *official* languages.

Without presuming to be able to speak for my entire age group, or for ever New Brunswicker or Canadian, I would also like to emphasize that my generation is growing weary of the dialogue surrounding the supposed “Two Solitudes” in Canada. I do not say this because we think that we have overcome all the challenges surrounding language relations in our country, but rather because Canada is not, by any standards, only composed of only two cultures or two nations.

Yes, we are a country of two *official* languages, but we are by no means a country where only two languages are spoken. This land has witnessed thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge and speech, and these languages are in great need of attention today. This land has also welcomed immigrants from all four corners of the world. Yes, some came from France and England, but others came from Poland, China, the Netherlands, Algeria and countless other regions. We must realize that our country is made up of an incredibly complex web of cultural identities. Though the agreement that formalized Canada was struck in French and English, we have never been a country of only two languages.

We can celebrate and preserve one linguistic community without hurting another. My vision of Canada includes the development of our official languages, but also the preservation of the many languages spoken in our country, especially the Indigenous languages. Their future depends on our collective desire to save this unique body of knowledge.

Canada is an amazing country, with a potential that undoubtedly exceeds our expectations, but we are also an unfinished project. We have the ability and, above all, the responsibility to preserve our distinct and multiple heritages. I have no doubt that we will be up to the challenge.