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The Meritless Language Argument

by Scott McPherson

Anti-immigrant types often use the language argument to make their case: that without a common language, people will never be able to get along and prosper.

I couldn't help but think of this recently when my wife and I decided to get some much-needed work done around the house. I'm no handyman, so we contacted a contractor and asked him to come out and give us a quote.

The man who showed up was from Lebanon. He spoke English with a heavy accent. More interesting, the helper he brought along was Hispanic. He didn't speak English at all!

The boss spoke a little Spanish, and between this and a great deal of sign language they communicated well enough to get their job done. A few days later they came out to our house and proved it.

This led me to thinking about other multi-lingual societies.

In Switzerland, for example, there are actually four languages spoken: Italian, French, German, and Romansch (not to mention, of course, English. People there typically speak at least three of these four languages.

And this loose federation of "cantons" (like states in the United States) has remained neutral and at peace — with both itself and the rest of the world — for nearly 200 years.

Go figure.

And then there's Quebec, Canada's unruly province. There the official language is French, but the British North America Act of 1867 established Canada at large as "a bilingual country with a bilingual government," according to John Remington Graham's *Constitutional History of Secession*. Furthermore,

The difference between these two main civilizations [Quebec and Canada's other nine Provinces] cannot be easily defined. Principal language is only a more obvious distinction. It extends no less to characteristic mentality, habits, appearance, style, religion, temperament, law, customs, education, literature, and attitudes about life in general.

Moreover, Canada, like Switzerland, has never experienced a civil war. Quebec's desire to maintain its historical autonomy within Canada has been accommodated by favorable judicial intervention and recourse to referenda. If only our own history were as chaste.

Graham notes in a footnote to his book,

The government of Quebec publishes all laws in French and English, and accepts all petitions and correspondence in French or English. Anybody may plead or testify in court, express any viewpoint, or engage in legislative or other public debate, in either French or English. The rights of the English-speaking minority are even more extensive, especially in the education of children.

As these examples show, faction is not automatically a product of different languages. Those who would use a "need" for a "common language" to express their anti-immigrant sentiments ignore facts to the contrary.

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