

It's time for a new government to commit to bilingualism In Ontario

There are well over 600,000 Ontarians who identify French as their first language. They are an essential and deeply valued part of Ontario's history.

However, the current government has turned its back on this important community. In his first cabinet, Doug Ford eliminated the standalone Ministry of Francophone Affairs. Then in November 2018, on what became known as "Jeudi Noir," Ontario's Office of the French Language Services Commissioner was abolished and the Université de l'Ontario français cancelled. When this sparked justified protests from the community, the government backtracked with half-measures that were little more than rearranging staff. They have yet to reinstate a standalone French Language Services Commissioner in Ontario. Last fall, this government backpedaled further by signing an agreement with the federal government on funding the Université de l'Ontario français, but is leaving it up to the federal government to provide all funding for its construction between now and 2023.

This shows a clear disregard for the rights and needs of Franco-Ontarians, who deserve better from their government.

I have been a supporter of Francophone issues and rights as the MPP for Scarborough-Guildwood and past Board member of TVO/TFO. I will be a leader who respects and restores the rights of all French-speaking people in Ontario.

These are my bold ideas for this community, which are based on inclusion and engagement.

A. Restore the independent French Language Services Commissioner / Commissariat des service en français in Ontario.

- It's not enough to tuck this role away under the Ontario Ombudsman. Many Franco-Ontarians rightly see the French Language Services Commissioner as an essential ally and advocate for protecting French language and culture in Ontario. The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages acts as a watchdog at the federal level, and I will ensure that this role is restored at the provincial level in Ontario.

B. Ensure the establishment of the Université de l'Ontario français, working closely with the community, and the federal government to make it a reality.

- The province shouldn't leave it up to the federal government to fund the construction of this crucial initiative over the next few years. Ontario needs to step up! As Premier, I will make this a priority.

- I'll also make sure this new institution establishes partnerships with other post-secondary institutions across the province to allow all Francophone communities in Ontario, especially those in the North, to benefit from the new Francophone university.

C. Expand opportunities for French-speaking education throughout Ontario.

- We must strive to ensure better access to French language programs like immersion in local schools, and make new investments to help train, recruit and attract teachers in both immersion and second Official Language programs. More children should have the opportunity to be immersed in French, as this will prove to be a benefit in keeping them, and our province, competitive in their future.
- More post-secondary students should have the ability to finish a degree in French at our post-secondary institutions. I plan to work with the federal government to build new infrastructure that supports strong Francophone communities, including schools and cultural centres.

D. Establish more support and funding for Franco-Ontarian arts, culture, and media.

- Francophone cultural and media outlets in Ontario, especially in the North, have been struggling for years to provide essential news services, information, and arts. These services could be the backbone of their communities. I will establish new programs and partnerships to support these organizations and ensure their vitality.

E. Reform the French Language Services Act to strengthen Francophone communities and ensure a bilingual province.

- We must ensure greater bilingualism in our public spaces. That means more bilingual signs in all Provincial parks and conservation areas, similar to Parks Canada. It also means removing barriers to establishing more bilingual towns and cities across the province.
- We need to improve the integration of newer francophones into Ontario society, be they from other parts of Canada or other parts of the world. The right to receive public services in French, an official language of Canada and the native language of many Ontarians, should be preserved and strengthened across the province. All French-speaking Ontarians must be supported and thrive in their communities, whether they are working in the civil service in Ottawa or elsewhere. We must ensure all Franco-Ontarians feel welcome here.
- Create a mechanism to recognize municipalities that want to be bilingual.

In the coming weeks, I'll be releasing more plans to address the needs of Franco-Ontarians, including improving health and long-term care, and developing new and innovative economic hubs and partnerships that support robust economic development opportunities.