Alain Otis
Translation: Shirley Hockin

THE TRANSLATION BUREAU: 150 YEARS IN THE MAKING

– I –

SHORTLY AFTER 3:00 P.M. on January 28, 1934, Secretary of State Charles H. Cahan rose in the House of Commons and announced that he was tabling for first reading Bill 4, *An Act respecting the Bureau for Translations*. In doing so, he set in motion a process that, nearly six months later, would lead to the proclamation of the *Act respecting the Bureau for Translations*.

But the tabling of Bill 4 was not the first step in centralizing the Government of Canada's translation services. In fact, it was the final step and the culmination of almost 80 years of debate and struggle.

Before Confederation

Before Confederation, Upper and Lower Canada formed a political entity known as the Province of Canada, which had a bicameral parliament composed of the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council. The two chambers had their own English and French translators. The first initiative to give structure to the government translation services dates from 1857, during the pre-Confederation era. Although translation had been organized in 1841, during the early days of the government of the United Canada, it had not been structured.

The Legislative Assembly had four translators in the 1850s. There was no administrative organization and no chief, and each translator did more or less as he pleased, according to Antoine Gérin-Lajoie, who was himself a translator in the

Assembly. In his memoirs, Gérin-Lajoie writes: “There are six translators (four permanent, two extra) . . . I dislike the work arrangement in the translators’ office intensely. Each person works as he sees fit. One translator may do six times more work than another, as was the case today, yet both receive the same salary. It would be fairer to appoint a chief who would be responsible for making sure the work was done, overseeing everything and pricing the translations.”

On October 24, 1854, Gérin-Lajoie submitted a plan for reorganizing the translation services to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Louis-Victor Sicotte. It was not until 1857 that the Assembly implemented Gérin-Lajoie’s plan. The Standing Committee on Contingencies of the Assembly organized the chamber’s translators into three bureaus: a laws division, to translate bills; a documents division, to translate reports and other documents requested by the Assembly; and a votes and proceedings division, to translate the Assembly proceedings. The chief translator was automatically the laws translator. At the same time, the Committee pointed out that translation required literary, technical and legal skills and proposed that translators therefore be paid more. This was the first measure to give administrative organization to translation in the Government of Canada.

Organization in the House

The translation of debates led to some measure of centralization of translation services. The debates of the Legislative Assembly were never translated, except for the 1865 debates on Confederation. Running to nearly 1,000 pages, this mammoth job was translated by contractors under the supervision of the chief French translator, E.-P. Dorion, and an assistant English translator, William Wilson. It was an extremely expensive undertaking. A decade later, the House of Commons decided once and for all to translate the debates. In 1875, this work was handled by a contractor, Médéric Lanctôt. Dissatisfied with the results, the House Debates Committee in 1876 gave responsibility for overseeing the translation of the debates to the chief translator in the House, T. G. Coursolles, and allotted $1.25 per page to pay the contract translators. Whether or not the Committee had centralization in mind when it took this step is a matter of debate, but its decision had the effect of centralizing all translation in the Government of Canada. The Senate had its own English and French translators, who did the work of the Senate—laws, documents, proceedings—while the House of Commons had its own translators, who did the work of the Commons—laws, documents, proceedings and debates.

In 1878, the Conservatives regained power and decided to have a contractor translate the debates, effectively putting an end to centralization after barely three

years. It is important to mention, however, that translation practitioners at the time did not favour centralization. The proof lies in the 1880 report of the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons appointed to consider "whether it would not be attended with Economy and Advantage if the translation department of each house were amalgamated." The chief English and French translators of the Commons and the Senate were asked for their opinion and unanimously dismissed the proposal, stating that they were convinced that centralization could not serve two masters equitably. One committee member—it is not known whether he was a senator or a member of the House—even suggested setting up a centralized translation service for the two houses of Parliament and the departments (which had to arrange for their own translation services), but his proposal was vigorously rejected for the same reasons. The feeling was that it would be preferable to create translation services in the departments—the opposite of centralization—to improve matters. In fact, there was talk of setting up a division to translate laws, which would have meant subdividing the Commons translation division! Clearly, the time was not right for centralization.

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The 1900s

Starting in 1902, the House of Commons divided its translation services into two bureaus, one to translate laws under the direction of the chief translator and the other to translate House documents under the direction of the assistant translator, who had the puzzling title of "secretary to the Translation Branch." At around the same time, the Senate merged its modest translation services (laws, documents, proceedings and debates). In 1908, with the coming into force of the *Civil Service Act*, the debates translators, who until then had been employees of the House of Commons Debates Committee, joined the ranks of civil servants. However, these translators were not added to the team of translators at the House, but formed a separate bureau under the direction of their head, Wilfrid Larose.

Two decisions made at this time promoted an increase in the number of translation services rather than centralization. The first, in 1907, was the recommendation—not to say order—by House of Commons clerk T. B. Flint to the deputy minister of Agriculture to hire translators to translate the departmental publications that the Commons translators could not easily deliver in a reasonable length of time. This recommendation also applied to other departments with numerous publications to translate. Then, in 1912, the King's Printer, the body responsible for printing all government documents, announced that it would no

longer provide translation services for the departments. Any departments that had not acted on Mr. Flint's recommendation had no option but to toe the line. A study by Achille Fréchette, chief translator at the House of Commons until 1910, had described centralization as the root of all evil in translation and advocated decentralization and more translation services. Not surprisingly, most departments had at least one translator on staff as of 1912.

The volume of translation work grew considerably during this time, and in 1913 the House set up a Blue Book translation service with roughly 15 members. World War I brought with it a new need: censorship of publications and mail. The Department of the Secretary of State and the Department of the Post Office, which had responsibility in this area, had the task of setting up services to administer censorship. Once again, a centralized service was not considered. Translation services for censorship were created both in the Department of the Post Office and in the Department of the Secretary of State. These were multilingual, decentralized services, which in the case of the Post Office stretched from sea to sea. It was just 1916.

In 1920, the Senate suggested to the House of Commons that their translation services merge, but the House would not consider the proposal. The true instigator of centralization in the 1920s was the Civil Service Commission. The *Civil Service Act, 1918* gave the Commission the power to facilitate administrative organization in the departments. In 1924, a Senate committee examined a series of measures to improve efficiency and save money by reorganizing and amalgamating services. Naturally, the committee targeted translation. At the time, there were 50 translators in the departments in Canada. The committee concluded that centralization would produce substantial savings, since the number of chief translators would be reduced, fewer reference books would be needed, and the workload could be distributed more equitably. The committee report did not produce any concrete results, at least as far as translation was concerned.

In 1931, the Secretary of State decided to form a centralized translation service for foreign languages. A circular was sent to all the deputy ministers to let them know that the services of this bureau were available free of charge. This was the first decisive step toward centralization of translation in the federal government. Three years later, the government proposed to centralize all translation services.

The Bureau for Translations

Bill 4, *An Act respecting the Bureau for Translations*, was introduced at second reading on February 27, 1934. It was very poorly received by the Liberal

opposition. E. R. E. Chevrier, the member for Ottawa, even moved the six months' hoist, which at the time spelled the death of a bill. His motion was defeated, but the opposition vociferously and strenuously fought the bill during second reading, the committee stage and the examination of the committee report. Chief translators were called to appear before the special committee studying the bill, and every one except Omer Chaput, chief translator with the Dominion Bureau of Statistics division of the Department of Trade and Commerce, came out against a centralized bureau. At the time, the idea of having all the translators work together under one roof was circulating. Although this idea had been considered, thought had also been given to establishing a central management structure and decentralized services in the departments. The bill was finally passed at third reading in May, nearly four months after being tabled for first reading. What a struggle it had been!

Passage by the Senate was an easier process. Seeing that the bill had been debated at length in the Commons, the senators devoted little time to it, although they did note that previous attempts at centralization had all been rejected by the deputy ministers, who feared a decline in service with a centralized bureau. The bill was passed by the Senate and received royal assent on June 28, 1934. The Bureau for Translations, which the Liberals had so vigorously fought when in opposition, would be maintained by the same Liberals when they came to power in the fall of 1935.

The name of the first superintendent was announced on October 1, 1934. He was D. T. Robichaud, chief translator at the Department of Public Works. Mr. Robichaud consulted the deputy ministers and decided to leave the translators in the departments (although he may have had no choice). At the Bureau for Translations, management would be centralized; operations, decentralized. To set up the new organization, the government issued orders in council to transfer translators from their home departments and agencies to the Department of the Secretary of State, which had responsibility for the Bureau. The initial two orders, dating from the fall of 1934, transferred about 50 translators. The superintendent's top priority was to organize parliamentary translation, especially the translation of House and Senate debates. Organizing the services in the departments had to wait, judging by the description of the Bureau in the 1935 government telephone directory: there is no mention of Bureau divisions in the departments, an indication that the departmental services were organized only after the parliamentary services. In 1937, another order transferred translators from some departments to the Bureau. At that point, there were 17 "divisions," as the departmental translation services were known. Four or five additional orders, the last issued in 1945 to add all the employees of the translation service at the Department of Munitions and Supply—about 15 translators and stenographers—to the Bureau, completed the transfer of translators from the departments.

In 1933, there were 91 translators working for the various government departments and agencies. Just after the Bureau was created in 1934, a member of Parliament asked for a list of the government translators, to see who had been transferred to the new Bureau, and why. According to the list, the translators who were not transferred apparently performed tasks in addition to translation in their department or agency. Only around 60 of the 91 translators were transferred to the Bureau. About 30 translators remained scattered among the departments, performing a variety of duties. After the initial transfers in 1934 and 1937, the Bureau turned to recruitment to swell its ranks, and the staff grew from 51 employees in 1935 to 230 in 1950. The organization kept its two-pillared structure, based on the two main sources of its work— Parliament and the departments—until the 1960s. The superintendent was the senior administrator, just one level above the division chiefs in the Bureau's flat corporate structure. Only the translation services in the Commons—especially Debates and Blue Books ("General Translation" from the 1930s on)—were large, as the vast majority of departmental divisions had just two or three translators, sometimes even fewer, until World War II. The war changed everything and exerted enormous pressure on the Bureau, which doubled in size between 1940 and 1945.

The Bureau, an institution

The idea of centralizing the government's translation services gained ground over many years before finally taking shape in the 1930s. Originally conceived as a measure that would bring all the translators together in one place, centralization eventually became a reality in a structure where management was centralized and service delivery, decentralized. In the years following its creation, the Bureau for Translations developed and proved its worth. It introduced interpretation in Parliament in 1959, expanded its translation and terminology services, took on new responsibilities and joined the Department of Public Works and Government Services in 1993, then became a special operating agency in 1995. It even got a new name in 1985: the Translation Bureau.

The creation and structuring of the Bureau were a successful product of the idea of centralization, winning the support of everyone involved in translation in the government and making it possible to put in place central functions such as a terminology research and products service and a training school and to set up special teams and missions. These achievements benefited the entire translation community and would have been difficult without a centralized organization. We pay tribute to those who had the wisdom to reconcile disparate ideas and requirements and who laid the foundation for the institution that the Bureau for Translations eventually became.

NOTES

The examination of Bill 4, *An Act respecting the Bureau for Translations*, is described in the *Debates of the House of Commons* and the *Debates of the Senate* for 1934 and in the *Report of the Select Special Committee on the Civil Service Act, 1934*. Bill 4 provides information on the number of translators at that time.

The information on the pre-Confederation era comes from the *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, the *Journals of the Legislative Council of the Province of Canada* and the *Confederation Debates, 1865*.

Gérin-Lajoie wrote his memoirs, which were edited by Léon Gérin in *Antoine Gérin-Lajoie : la résurrection d'un patriote canadien* (Éditions du Devoir, 1925), pp. 92-109.

The references to the debates after 1875 are taken from the *Debates of the House of Commons*, published in English and French, from 1875 on.

The Joint Committee of both Houses appointed to consider whether it would not be attended with economy and advantage to the Public Service if the "Law Department" of each House and that of "Translation" were respectively amalgamated published its report in the *Journals of the House of Commons, 1880*.

The events of 1902 and after are described in the *Journals of the House of Commons* and the *Journals of the Senate*.

The references to the letters from T. B. Flint and the King's Printer are taken from documents in the National Archives of Canada.

Achille Fréchette's *Report on the Translation Services in Belgium and Switzerland* was released by the House of Commons in 1910.

The events surrounding the multilingual services during the war years are described in Keshen, J., *Propaganda and Censorship during Canada's Great War* (University of Alberta Press, 1996), in Steinhart, A., *Civil Censorship in Canada during World War I* (Unitrade, 1986), and in the *Public Accounts of Canada*, War Appropriations, published in the *Sessional Papers*.

The report of the *Special Committee on the Civil Service* was released by the Senate in 1924.

The 1931 creation of the multilingual service in the Department of the Secretary of State is described in documents at the National Archives of Canada.

The appointment of the Superintendent of the Bureau is described in *Le Droit*, October 1, 1934.

The orders transferring translators to the Bureau come from the National Archives of Canada. The information on the structure of the Bureau after 1935 comes from the *Government of Canada telephone directories* for 1935 and subsequent years and the *Annual Reports of the Bureau for Translations*, published in the *Annual Reports of the Department of the Secretary of State*, for 1936 and subsequent years.

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"Histoire de la traduction au Canada" in *Meta*, special issue, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 1977), 87 pp. Articles on various aspects of the history of translation in Canada, from its origins to 1975.

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