Y4Y Québec

# The Importance of Symbolism to the English-Speaking Community in Québec

**Policy Brief**

Y4Y Québec

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## *Introduction*

In the post-industrial western world, aggregations of people with similar socio-economic profiles tend to form in urban centres. For that to happen, people must acknowledge that they share analogue characteristics with a group of people; collective identity leads to the sense of belonging and engagement among the community. These communities can have many unifying factors like class, age, race, language, music taste, sexuality, heritage etc. These factors are not exclusionary, meaning that being a part of a certain community is not exclusive and people can feel represented and linked to many communities at the same time. A common way of identifying social groups is through symbols. Flags and other visual objects represent certain communities and reinforce the sense of belonging. Seeing a flag of a community that one is a part of can make people feel included in a space and resonate with people on a deeper level.

## *Context*

The anglophone community makes up 13.4% of the population in Québec and over 80% of them reside in Montreal and the metropolitan area (Government of Canada). The remaining 20% are dispersed across the province. Anglophone quebecers have a lower sense of belonging (Government of Canada, 2007) and study shows that they are less engaged in their communities than francophones. Y4Y believes that by strengthening connection with a community through symbols, engagement can be increased.

Across Canada, francophone communities outside of Québec each have their own flags and linguistic minorities tend to develop symbols of identification to create an incentive for collective identity. In Québec, the English-speaking community is a linguistic minority and the flag that represents them has been decided on very recently although the discussion of having a flag and the lack of symbols that reflect the community are not new. Youth 4 Youth developed a flag project that created a symbol to represent the english-speaking community based on suggestions they have made and voted on. The project created the flag with the objective of mobilizing and engaging anglophones in Québec through increasing visibility and community vitality. The symbol was decided based on votes from the community level and there has not been an official provincial inauguration of the symbol.

Symbolism is important for the collective identity building process. According to Garcia (2018), there are two other crucial elements of collective identity: one must identify oneself with it, without any form of external coercion and there must be social recognition from other members of the community towards that person. This means that not only must people accept that identity, other members of the community must recognize it as well. While flags can be used as tools to build ownership over geographical space, for a linguistic minority community, a flag can help increase both the sense of unity and sense of belonging among the members. Having a relevant and known flag can lead to a unified community that has higher chances of engaging and helping each other based on self and communal recognition.

At the same time, flags can be the cause of polarization and division in a nation. The existence of a flag for the anglophone community can be seen as a threat for francophone communities as it may be perceived to emphasize division between them. It is understandable that people in Québec might feel this way because of the historical background they share and Y4Y believes that there are alternatives that can be created with new symbols. It is important to reiterate and make it clear to the population that people can belong to multiple communities at once and being a part of one does not exclude the possibility of connection with another. New symbols can express the multilingual characteristic of the province and the multicultural factor which can reinforce citizen engagement and consequently create a larger sense of belonging to Québec.

## *Youth 4 Youth's Stance*

There are existing flags that tried to be representative of the multicultural and multilingual aspects of

Québec. The Québec Coat of Arms has parts that symbolize the English, French and Candian attributes of the canadian territory; it has colonial roots and has not been popularly used or identified in the recent past. However, symbols can be redesigned and resignified if there is an intention. Y4Y believes that the creation of new symbols that represent the multiculturalism and multilingual aspect of the province instead of dividing it into linguistic communities would be a good first step. Another option would be to consider the example of Ontario and the use the trillium as a provincial symbol without culturally separating who it represents. The trillium is easily and widely recognized; Québec, as every other province in Canada, has a flower that represents it: the Blue Flag Iris. With general dissemination and exposure of a new symbol, the meaning of being a part of Québec's community can be reframed and become more inclusive to linguistic variety. There is no intention to create a contested ownership through symbolism in Québec and a shift in meaning from putting differences in the spotlight to celebrating them would be in the best interest of the province.

By creating new symbols or reconsidering old ones, Québec can make the english-speaking community and other linguistic minority groups feel included in the general population and promote engagement among them. Language plurality in the province should not be an obstacle for the feeling of belonging but an incentive for involvement and pride.

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