



Federal Literacy Facts

an update on literacy-related developments at the national level

Movement for Canadian Literacy

August 2004

Influencing Change: The Impact of a Minority Government on Literacy

When MPs arrive back in Ottawa on October 4th, they will be returning to a very different post-election political landscape. The election of a Liberal minority government means that the Liberals no longer hold more than 50% of the seats in the House of Commons and therefore must have support from MPs in one or more of the other political parties in order to govern. If they do not receive that support, then the government could fall and another federal election would soon follow. (See page 2 for more on minority governments.)

For the literacy movement, a minority government has advantages and disadvantages. History shows that minority governments tend to pass socially progressive policies. In this parliament, we can expect the Liberals to try to align with the NDP and possibly members of the Bloc Quebecois in order to secure the votes they need to pass legislation. This support will have a price. For example, the NDP will insist on legislation and policies that mesh with social democratic principles and priorities. For the literacy movement, this merger of Liberal and NDP philosophies could be positive. Both political parties have supported our call for literacy policy advances. During the last election campaign, MCL was even able to secure both parties' written commitment to move forward on a literacy strategy and policy agenda (see www.literacy.ca). The move towards socially progressive policies combined with both parties previous commitments to literacy may provide some new opportunities for leveraging the literacy action and advances we've been seeking.

The key disadvantage of a minority government is its instability. The need for negotiation tends to slow down the process of governing. Also, the constant pre-election mood may mean more delays on the literacy front as other, more politically charged policy areas (healthcare, Star Wars, etc.) consume time, headlines, and political energy in Ottawa.

Fall Action Campaign 2004: Renewing Momentum on Literacy

This Fall, MCL is planning a number of initiatives intended to influence action on a pan-Canadian literacy strategy and renewed federal literacy policy. Over the past years we've had great success in helping raise literacy's status on the public agenda. However, in the 6 months preceding the June federal election, changes in government, in Parliament, and in the Prime Minister's office effectively slowed government operations to a crawl. Literacy is not the only issue to be sidelined by government gridlock. Many of our partners in the NGO community have also felt the impact. Now, with a new parliament and new power brokers in Ottawa, MCL is planning a Fall Literacy Action Campaign aimed at getting literacy back on top of political agendas and government "to do" lists.

We have good reason to be optimistic about this. Many developments serve to strengthen our messages and our goals, including recent research that proves literacy investments drive economic growth (see www.nald.ca/fulltext/oced/oced.pdf); invaluable support from provincial and territorial governments; the anticipated release of a new international adult literacy study (IALSS) in 2005; past commitments from government and parliament, and recent election promises (see www.literacy.ca/elect04/parties/main.htm).

Our plans include connecting with every newly elected parliamentarian; working with the coalitions to support further advances at the provincial/territorial level; planning a successful Literacy Action Day on Parliament Hill in October, and other efforts to influence and inform key decision makers. Stay tuned to www.literacy.ca for more information.

Policy Update

News from Human Resources and Skills Development (HRSD)

When Prime Minister Martin announced his new Cabinet in July, Joe Volpe was reappointed as HRSD Minister. In addition, two literacy allies were named Parliamentary Secretaries to Minister Volpe. Peter Adams has been a long-time literacy champion and Gurbax Singh Malhi sat on the HRDC Standing Committee when it studied literacy. The new Minister for Social Development is Ken Dryden, another literacy supporter. At this point it is not clear when Senator Fairbairn will be reappointed as Special Advisor on Literacy.

Recently, MCL met with the new Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for Learning (and literacy) at HRSD. Marie-Josée Thivierge assured us that reorganization within HRSD will support, rather than undermine, progress on a literacy agenda. She reported that literacy policy advances are a departmental priority and that high-level HRSD officials view literacy as integral to the success of the department's mandate. MCL plans to be a part of the federal process and will work to ensure that the community is involved and informed as well.

Promising signs from the provinces and territories

Both the Council of the Federation and the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) have identified literacy as a priority. In July, Premiers at a Council of the Federation meeting received from their Ministers of Labour and Education a report entitled *Council of the Federation: Government Initiatives Promoting Literacy Best Practices*. The report (see www.councilofthefederation.ca) will be used by Ministers in each jurisdiction to improve literacy practices and approaches. Also, MCL has learned that CMEC, which publicly identified literacy as a priority after its meeting in March, is interested in moving forward on a pan-Canadian literacy strategy. MCL will monitor future CMEC meetings and will report on significant developments.

More on Minority Governments

- This is Canada's first federal minority government in 25 years.
- To survive, a minority government usually negotiates a coalition with another Party, or forms alliances motion by motion in order to pass legislation. Alternatively, a minority government may choose to pursue legislation that would be politically difficult to oppose (for example, increased federal support for healthcare).
- The defeat of a bill involving a major policy issue, or a tax or supply bill, is regarded as a "vote of non-confidence".
- Following a "vote of non-confidence", parliament is dissolved and a federal election is called.
- On average, minority governments last approximately 18 months before falling to a "vote of non-confidence" or before the governing party calls an election.
- Some of Canada's most progressive policies were enacted under minority governments, including old age pensions, universal healthcare, Canada student loans, and the Canada Assistance Plan.
- For more information on politics and government, check out this non-profit, non-partisan, political education website: www.mapleleafweb.ca.

Mark your calendars!

International Literacy Day: Sept. 8th

Parliament Resumes: October 4th

Speech from the Throne: October 5th

Literacy Action Day 2004: October 21st