



# Canada's Official Languages: Policy Versus Work Practice in the Federal Public Service

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# The case of the federal public service

“**How** the Public Service does things – who it employs, where it operates, and what language is used – is as important as **what** it does.”

(Beattie et al. 1972, x1iii)

# Research question

- **Why**, despite the promise of the Official Languages Act (OLA) 1969 for choice in language of work and the OLA 1988 that made the choice a claimable right, **is there inequitable access to French as a language of work in the federal public service?**

# Project overview

- Period of analysis: 1967-2013
- Key contributions:
  - **Empirical:** Analysis and assessment of the implementation of official languages legislation in the Canadian federal public service.
  - **Theoretical:** Confirmation of ‘path dependency’; layering does not always produce meaningful change.

# Current research context

- **Politics of language:** Language is a salient political issue in Canada. The principles underlying language policy and the role of the state in managing linguistic tendencies are well established.

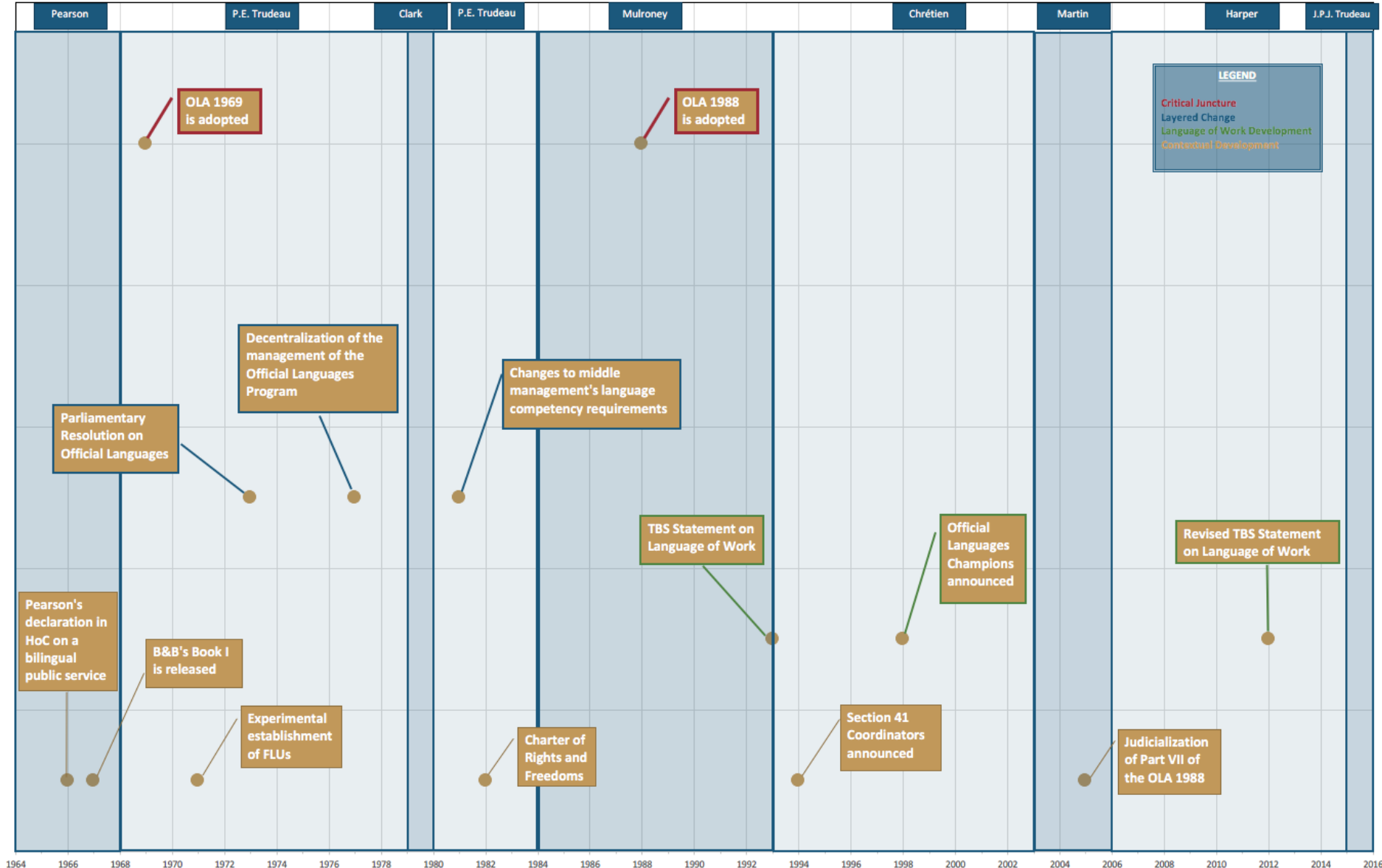
# Current research context

- **Representative bureaucracy:** The federal public service is often assessed as an institution to manage diversity. Seldom is it an object of analysis onto itself.

# Theoretical approach

- **Historical institutionalism:** Longitudinal frame; focuses on formal institutions.
  - Path dependency: Tendency to persist/keep existing course.
  - Critical junctures: Moments of major change.
- **Layering:** Adding new rules alongside or on-top of existing ones.

# The implementation of official languages legislation in the Canadian federal public service





# Methodology

- **Process tracing:** Linking observations to explain an outcome (inductive analysis).
- **Sources:**
  - Archival research
  - Primary interviews
    - Public servants (executives)
    - Commissioners of Official Languages
    - Politicians
  - Secondary sources

# Modalities of analysis

- 1. Ideas:** Language as a political compromise v. language as a right.
- 2. Institutions:** Structural features; stable overtime; constrain and enable behaviour of actors.
- 3. Actors:** Individuals or organizations that influenced the public service.

# Ideas

- Changing perceptions of the role of language in society:
  - OLA 1969: Language as a tool for political compromise.
  - OLA 1988: Language within a rights framework.
- Useful for contextual analysis; not as an explanatory variable.

# Institutions

- The persistence of institutions matters.
  - Merit principle
  - French Language Units (FLUs)
- Reforms from layering can be limited and produce haphazard results.

# Actors

- **Elite political and bureaucratic actors:** Namely, Prime Ministers, Presidents of the Treasury Board, etc.
- **Staff unions:** Acted as veto players.
- **Managers:** Primary actors responsible for language of work.

# Conclusions

- **Institutional structure:** An imperative for meaningful choice in language of work.
- **Bilingualism bonus:** A contributor to the perception of the superficiality of official languages.
- **The importance of leadership:** Managerial practices and political will can promote some change.

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