

Media Release
For immediate release

SFM leader retires after four decades leading French rights

Saint-Boniface, February 26, 2024 – One of Canada’s leading francophone activists announced his retirement today after a lifetime of championing French language, rights and culture in Manitoba, as the executive director of the Société de la Francophonie manitobaine (SFM).

Daniel Boucher became the SFM Executive Director at age 36 and has witnessed and led the overall development and efforts to ensure full respect of the rights of Francophones for almost 30 years, outdistancing seven Manitoba premiers and six Canadian prime ministers as he tirelessly addressed entrenched issues and advanced innovative ideas to sustain and grow French culture in Manitoba.

Boucher is recognized for the significant leap the SFM has made to embrace the need to be a fully inclusive organization for French speaking Manitobans whether they were born in St-Pierre-Jolys, Manitoba or Bamako, Mali; whether they were raised in French-speaking families or learned the language from years of French Immersion schooling. With this broader vision, and informed by an exhaustive community engagement process, the SFM rebranded in 2017 to go from Société franco-manitobaine to the more modern and inclusive Société de la francophonie manitobaine under his leadership.

“That change of a few letters in our name reflects decades of hard work by Mr. Boucher, who could see our role in the broader context,” says SFM Chair Angela Cassie. “His mark on our province and country is indelible and will benefit our communities for generations to come.”

“Mr. Boucher has always understood the big picture is about serving the community in all its rich diversity. This community is forever grateful for his dedication and perseverance through all these years. These will be hard shoes to fill but he leaves a strong team and foundation to build upon,” said Cassie. She added that the board of directors has hired an executive search firm People First HR to start to find its next leader to replace Boucher, whose last day is August 30, 2024.

“From his time as an elected member of the SFM Board in 1983, at the height of the language crisis, Mr. Boucher quickly became involved in the efforts to secure acceptance of the constitutional amendment negotiated between the SFM and the provincial and federal governments,” says former SFM President, Leo Robert.

“He has always chosen conciliation over confrontation, allowing him to develop good working relationships with senior officials and elected representatives at all levels. I sincerely thank him for his dedication to our community over the years and wish him a well-deserved retirement, health and happiness,” said Robert.

Alain Dupuis, Executive Director of the Federation of Francophone and Acadian Communities of Canada (FCFA) adds, “Daniel has been part of all the struggles and major undertakings of the Canadian Francophonie over the past three decades, always in a collaborative and unifying spirit. He is one of those rare and precious individuals

who has seen the evolution of the Francophonie and accumulated an impressive volume of expertise in official languages and community development. He will be sorely missed at the FCFA national table."

Before becoming executive director in 1994, Boucher was on staff as a policy analyst just as the French language crisis had come to an end. He saw first-hand how dangerous it had become to be advocating for a restoration of French rights in Manitoba as guaranteed by the Manitoba Act of 1870. Tensions over linguistic rights led to anti-French sentiment and SFM offices were firebombed in January 1983, forcing some leaders to move their families to safe houses.

Boucher was raised in St. Jean Baptiste and Ste. Anne, Manitoba. His father Joseph was a family doctor, his mother Raymonde died when he was 11 and his stepmother Lucienne, a former police officer, helped raise him and his six other siblings.

See the attached Questions and Answers and Fact Sheet for some of Boucher's own reflections and recollections spanning his four decades of advocacy.

You can also find high-quality photos of Boucher at the following link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/pb6hq0lyyn81nuky9g430/h?rlkey=5lrx6tlpqpgyt2coy4bzoyxn5&dl=0>

Photo credit: Dan Harper

According to Stats Canada, 112,115 Manitobans could have a conversation in French in 2021. This is up 11,410 people from 1991. (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2023011-eng.htm>)

The Société de la Francophonie manitobaine (SFM), an organization representing the Manitoba Francophone community, ensures the development of this community and demands full respect for its rights.

-30-

For any information, please contact:

Marianne Champagne

Communications Manager

Telephone: (204) 233-4915

mchampagne@sfm.mb.ca

An interview with Daniel Boucher, retiring Executive Director of the Société de la francophonie manitobaine

1. If you could isolate three key moments for the SFM and for French rights in Manitoba during your time, what would they be?

There are so many but let me try to narrow it down. I think for me the key moments were:

1. When we got our own school division in 1994 – Division scolaire franco-manitobaine. For the generation that preceded me, the teachers and kids would hide their French books when the school inspector came to visit the classroom because teaching French was not allowed, so getting our own school division was a huge change in my lifetime. I worked on that file to get the school division and it was not a picnic.
2. Creating an SFM development plan in 2001 that was not a traditional plan but asked, “what will 2050 look like for us?” We looked deeply at trends and statistics that showed the number of Francophones was going down and we had to ask ourselves, what are we going to do about that? We realized it was time to do things differently and come out of our shell... and we did with this plan. Many of our sister organizations in other provinces adopted our approach because it was very good.
3. One of those key pillars in our plan was to take a role in getting more Francophone immigrants to move to Manitoba. We started Accueil francophone in 2003 and, so far this year, it helped over 1,500 newcomers come to Manitoba. We have shown our arms are wide open to new immigrants. Accueil francophone has become an influential resource for all immigrants and now has 50 employees. Starting this year, it will become its own organization. That is a great success story.

2. What do you think today’s generation needs to know about the past?

We were coming out of a language crisis when I first started my career. George Forest had taken his English-only parking ticket through to the Supreme Court and in 1979 won his argument that French language in Manitoba was protected in the 1870 Manitoba Act. The court consequences were that the Manitoba Government was told to translate 4,500 laws on the books. The SFM and the community wanted something more practical and negotiated with the federal government to make sure our rights were protected in the federal constitution and get better services in French. It was a very scary time because there were demonstrations at the Manitoba Legislature opposed to French rights, and threats against the Chair of our board and the SFM office was burnt down. There was too much pressure on the governments and for a period nothing was done. But when Premier Gary Filmon came in things started to turn around and we developed a new relationship with him, and French-language services started to get introduced. Also, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney at the time was speaking loudly in support of French and some peace came back. Finally, there was a positive change.

3. You have seen seven Manitoba premiers come and go and six Prime Ministers. What advice would you give today’s political leaders on the future of French language and culture?

Support for official languages must be demonstrated from the top leadership. They don’t have to be talking about it every day but when federal ministers come to Manitoba for an announcement, they need to speak French as well as English. Premier Kinew is speaking French and he quickly acknowledged Francophone Louis Riel as a symbolic first premier. This is great. It’s not complicated; sometimes it can be the smallest

gesture like speaking both languages at the microphone, so that we don't take for granted what we've fought so hard to get. Because if you don't use it, it won't stay.

4. What are those sensitive issues that are rumbling below the surface that you think we need to sit up and pay more attention to?

Budget cuts where French services are the victims, like cuts to Radio-Canada and institutions we count on need to be here and be robust. A cut in Montreal is different than a cut in Winnipeg where French staff is already small. We must keep lobbying to make sure that doesn't happen.

As well, how we're transforming our community and bringing more immigrants here is not always appreciated. But we need to double down and be more welcoming of diversity.

And we would like to see our relationships with English Métis improve; not everyone realizes there is French Métis and English Métis and we have not always worked together.

And of course, social media and streaming of content from the US is taking over and has a big influence on our younger generation. Most social media, music, radio is in English, and we are rowing against the current to try to keep youth connected and using French.

5. Who would you like to thank – professionally and personally – for making these four decades possible?

Well, first, my wife and kids have been so supportive.

My work colleagues, past and present.

I have been very lucky in my career to have been mentored by some amazing people, like my board chairs and colleagues across the country and government partners. Finally, all the people in the community and the dozens of organizations working with us to support the Francophonie citizens, we may not have always agreed on everything, but we always knew we were working for the community.

For any information, please contact:

Marianne Champagne
Communications Manager
Telephone: (204) 233-4915
mchampagne@sfm.mb.ca

SFM major advancements

Recent Successes for Francophones in Manitoba

1. **EDUCATION:** The rights of linguistic minorities to control their own education was recognized by the Courts, leading to the creation of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine (Article 23 of the Manitoba Act). The SFM supported the parent organization that took the question to the Supreme Court.
2. **ADVOCACY:** From the Charlottetown Accord to bilingual licence plates in Manitoba and the renewal of Canada's Official Languages Act, to name but a few.
3. **FRENCH-LANGUAGE SERVICES:** Negotiations with the City of Winnipeg to improve French-language services, advocacy leading to a bilingual Winnipeg logo and tagline, creation of a French-language services director position.

Negotiations with Province of Manitoba for better French-language services in health, education, and other areas.

Over 30 years, from a 1989 Report recommending active designated bilingual regions to a provincial French-language policy and creation of a network of Bilingual Service Centres across Manitoba. Finally, "the Francophone Community Enhancement and Support Act, passed in 2016 with unanimous approval of the legislature, embeds pre-existing rights and policies in legislation without radically altering or adding to them. Significantly, the law was passed with no opposition and virtually no attention from the English-speaking majority. French language rights have become an accepted and largely uncontroversial part of the political landscape in Manitoba." (Canadian Encyclopedia)

4. **IMMIGRATION:** The cornerstone of the strategy aiming to expand the Francophone space includes welcoming Francophones from Europe and Africa. This leads to the creation of Accueil francophone, a francophone settlement that will become an independent organization in a few months.
5. **COMMUNITY/ECONOMY:** Creation of SFM's Réseau communautaire, a network of community liaisons across francophone/bilingual communities in Manitoba with SFM rural presence and connection. Organizations such as the Association of Bilingual Municipalities of Manitoba and CDEM (Conseil de développement économique des municipalités bilingues) are created to support Francophone entrepreneurs and promote bilingualism as an added value to Manitoba's economy.

For any information, please contact:

Marianne Champagne
Communications Manager
Telephone: (204) 233-4915
mchampagne@sfm.mb.ca