
A Primer on Accent Discrimination in the Canadian Context

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Negative attitudes toward foreign-accented speech have led to discrimination against second-language users in Canada. This article reviews aspects of the Canadian human rights process as they pertain to language and accent, and identifies three types of accent discrimination arising in human rights cases: discrimination in employment due to inappropriate concern with accent, discrimination due to accent stereotyping, and harassment based on accent. It is argued that ESL teachers can work to stop this kind of discrimination by developing an understanding of the role of accent in communication and by promoting informed attitudes toward second-language users' speech, in both the classroom and the community.

Les attitudes négatives face à la prononciation avec accent étranger sont sources de discrimination contre les locuteurs de langue seconde au Canada. Cet article étudie des aspects des droits de la personne au Canada dans le contexte de la langue et des accents. L'article identifie trois types de discrimination qui a été documentée au Canada dans des cas juridiques impliquant les droits de la personne : la discrimination en milieu d'emploi résultant d'une préoccupation induite avec l'accent; la discrimination attribuable aux stéréotypes liés à l'accent; et le harcèlement basé sur l'accent. L'auteur maintient que les enseignants en ALS sont en mesure d'intervenir pour arrêter ce genre de discrimination, notamment en expliquant le rôle de l'accent dans la communication et en faisant la promotion d'attitudes éclairées face à la production orale des locuteurs de langue seconde.

The most obvious indication that someone is a second-language (L2) user is a tendency to produce speech with a "foreign accent." It is now widely accepted that the acquisition of a second language after early childhood almost inevitably results in speech that differs from that of native speakers (Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995; Long, 1990; Oyama, 1976; Scovel, 1988; Tahta, Wood, & Loewenthal, 1981), largely because knowledge of the sound system of the first language (L1) influences the perception and production of the phonetic patterns of the second (Flege, 1995; Werker & Polka, 1993). Moreover, speech research indicates that people tend to be highly sensitive to even slight divergences from the pronunciation patterns of their speech community. In a perceptual study conducted by Flege (1984), for example,

phonetically untrained listeners were able to detect a foreign accent in tiny segments of speech as short as .03 seconds.

Although the growing prevalence of L2 user speech in Canada has given ESL speakers a relatively high profile, the results of increased exposure to accented speech have not always been positive. In fact accent is just one of a number of characteristics, along with skin color, dress, or mannerisms, that may be used to identify someone as “foreign” or “different” and that can serve as an excuse for discriminatory treatment. Some people regard an accent itself as an undesirable characteristic, and negative attitudes toward L2 user speech are sometimes unintentionally promoted even by teachers and researchers (Munro, in press).

Evidence of discriminatory attitudes toward accented speakers has been reported in a wide range of American studies over the past 30 years (Lippin-Green, 1997). In Raisler’s (1976) work, for example, 730 undergraduate students rated an unseen speaker with a noticeable accent as less interesting, less convincing, and even less physically attractive than a native English speaker. Brennan and Brennan (1981) showed that the perceived strength of Mexican Americans’ accents was inversely related to the perceived status of the speakers. And Dávila, Bohara, and Sanz (1993) reported that stronger accents were associated with lower incomes among Mexican Americans. In a Canadian study by Kalin and Rayko (1978), listeners judged speakers with a general Canadian accent as more suited than non-native speakers to high-status jobs. Sato’s (1998) examination of attitudes toward L2 accent in Alberta revealed effects of location (rural vs. urban) and education level (high school vs. university) of the listeners. Although both rural and urban high school listeners had somewhat negative attitudes, the urban listeners tended to be more tolerant of accents, whereas university-level listeners seemed not to link aspects of personality (e.g., kindness and sociability) and solidarity (e.g., reliability and cooperativeness) to accent.

Foreign Accent, Stereotyping, and Speech Intelligibility

A person may react negatively to an accent for a variety of reasons. One possibility is that the prejudices one holds against a particular group of people may be activated when one hears speech patterns associated with that group (Brennan & Brennan, 1981; Lambert, 1967). This phenomenon, which I refer to as *accent stereotyping*, may lead to discriminatory behavior toward particular groups or toward foreigners in general.

Some people may disfavor accented speech if it is unintelligible or appears to require some special effort to comprehend. In fact it is well known that second-language users sometimes have difficulty making themselves understood. But although accented speech can indeed take longer for a listener to process than native speech (Munro & Derwing, 1995), even a strong foreign accent does not necessarily lead to reduced intelligibility. In

fact heavily accented speech can often be perfectly intelligible (Derwing & Munro, 1997; Munro & Derwing, 1995, 1999), and there is no reason to believe that accented speech is typically difficult to understand. Rather, familiarity with particular accents and particular speakers probably results in improved comprehension (Gass & Varonis, 1984). Thus an objection to accents on the grounds that they are unintelligible may sometimes have more to do with an unwillingness to accommodate differences in one's interlocutors than with a genuine concern about comprehension.

Despite these facts, some scholars have historically viewed accented speech as inherently problematic. For example in a textbook for speech pathologists, Greene and Wells (1927) grouped foreign-accented speech along with a number of diseases and disorders and concluded that foreign accent was a type of speech defect. Although this view might reflect the intolerance of a forgotten era, more recent writing also promotes the belief that accents are undesirable. In a book of readings on teaching English pronunciation, for example, Griffen (1991), presents the following surprising opinion:

The goal of instruction in pronunciation is that the student ... should learn to speak the language as naturally as possible, free of any indication that the speaker is not a clinically normal native. (p. 182)

Indeed, a quick perusal of bookstores and internet Web sites will reveal a number of popular publications and programs promising to help ESL learners "eradicate" their accents. Although some studies have indicated that pronunciation training can help L2 users to produce more intelligible speech (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1997, 1998; Perlmutter, 1989) and that accents can be modified in clinical settings (see Schmidt, 1997, for an overview), the approach in most of this work is pragmatic and tends to focus on pronunciation problems that affect intelligibility. No ethical teacher or researcher would claim that foreign accents can be routinely eliminated, no matter what type of pedagogy or speech therapy is used.

Accent Discrimination in Canada: Overview and Rationale for this Analysis

Although an examination of attitudes toward L2 accents is an important endeavor, particularly in the era of World Englishes, another issue of direct concern is how people with foreign accents are treated in the community. To my knowledge no researcher has yet examined accent discrimination cases in Canada in an attempt to understand how this phenomenon directly affects people's lives. In the sections that follow I identify some key issues by reviewing several cases in which this kind of discrimination has been alleged and some sort of resolution achieved.

One justification for this discussion is the importance of the issue to those who work with immigrants. In particular, ESL teachers need to be sensitive to human rights issues connected with language and to be conscious of the kinds of attitudes toward L2 user English that they foster in their students. For these reasons it may be helpful for them to know something about the human rights process in this country and how recent cases of accent discrimination have been resolved. This article will serve as a starting point for ESL teachers wishing to learn more about these issues.

The observations made here are part of an ongoing survey and analysis of human rights cases involving language-related issues in Canada since 1980. The details of most of these cases are readily available from the relevant government agencies or in the *Canadian Human Rights Reporter*, a journal available in most libraries. It is striking that in most cases where language is involved, the notion of accent figures importantly. Of course, it is important to recognize that in common usage, "accent" is not always understood to refer specifically to pronunciation patterns. Some members of the linguistically untrained public may, for example, interpret non-target-like grammatical patterns (e.g., "She goed there" or "I am work") as accented. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I use the term *accent discrimination* in reference to any case where acoustic speech patterns (i.e., pronunciation) are implicated in a claim of discrimination.

The cases discussed here are not intended to serve as a representative sample. In fact no one knows how often language discrimination occurs in Canada or whether this phenomenon is increasing or decreasing in frequency. In the first place, many instances may go unreported. In addition, most human rights cases in Canada are resolved without consideration by any judicial body. Most cases in which the respondent is clearly at fault are resolved through a settlement well before the tribunal stage is reached.¹ And those cases in which the complainant is unable to provide evidence that discrimination actually occurred are likely to be dismissed or withdrawn before a tribunal hearing. Although the outcomes of tribunal cases are widely disseminated and readily available for scrutiny, these cases are among the least clear-cut, often because of limited or apparently contradictory evidence. Consequently, this examination of published human rights cases provides only a partial view of language discrimination in this country. Nevertheless, I show that a review of such cases serves as a useful means of understanding some of the more important aspects of accent discrimination.

The Human Rights Process in Canada

Most human rights cases in Canada pertain to employment, tenancy, or the provision of services. Complaints may be presented to one of the statutory bodies referred to as Human Rights Commissions in the provinces and Yukon, and at the national level. In the Northwest Territories and Nunavut

the Fair Practices offices are charged with these concerns. As with other matters, the responsibilities for human rights at the provincial and federal levels of government are determined by the constitutional division of powers outlined in the Constitution Act, 1867. For example, because matters concerning banks and transportation fall under federal jurisdiction, a complaint against a bank or airline would have to be addressed to the Canadian Human Rights Commission. On the other hand, someone with a concern about tenancy rights or employment in organizations not under federal jurisdiction would approach a provincial human rights commission.

The structures and processes used to resolve complaints are similar across jurisdictions. A person (*complainant*) who believes that he or she has experienced discrimination may lodge a formal complaint against the *respondent*, usually within one year of the alleged act of discrimination. The protected grounds under the Canadian Human Rights Act are sex, race, religion, color, national or ethnic origin, physical or mental disability, family or marital status, sexual orientation, pardoned conviction, and age (with limitations). With minor differences among the provinces, these are the protected grounds in all jurisdictions. If the complaint is accepted, an officer typically investigates it by gathering relevant information from the complainant, the respondent, and other parties. A complaint may be resolved in several ways:

1. The complainant and respondent may agree to settle the case, often through monetary or some other sort of compensation. This is common when the complainant has a strong case and the respondent does not wish to incur extensive legal expenses or negative publicity when the complaint is likely to be upheld.
2. The complainant may withdraw the case, perhaps because it appears to have no hope of succeeding.
3. After investigation, the commission may determine that the case should be dismissed, perhaps because of lack of evidence to support it.
4. After investigation, the commission may determine that the case should be sent to a quasi-judicial tribunal for resolution. Of course, the tribunal may rule in favor of either the complainant or the respondent.

With respect to language issues, it is important to observe first that in most jurisdictions language itself is not a protected ground; nor, of course, is accent. However, language proficiency can be seen as related to (or a consequence of) ancestry and place of origin, because a person's knowledge of a language depends on where he or she grew up. For example, in the case of *Victor Cornejo v. Opus Building Corporation* (1991), Cornejo, a Chilean immigrant, had lived in Canada for about 12 years. After he had worked as a laborer for several weeks, his site superintendent laid him off, claiming that his English was inadequate. However, when this case was presented before the BC Council of Human Rights,² the Council concluded that the language proficiency requirement had not been imposed in good faith and that there

was no indication that Cornejo's command of English had affected his ability to carry out his work—a job that required only rudimentary English skills. The Council determined that Cornejo had experienced discrimination because of ancestry and place of origin and awarded him one month's lost wages and \$2,000 as compensation for humiliation.

A second observation is that denying someone employment on a protected ground is not discrimination if there is a legitimate reason to require some type of knowledge or skill of an individual. For example, if an airline refused to hire a person with poor vision as a pilot, the refusal would not be considered discrimination on the basis of physical disability, because excellent vision is a bona fide occupational requirement (BFOR) of airline pilots. The issue of language proficiency as a BFOR has arisen in a number of language-related human rights cases, such as *Fletcher Challenge Canada Limited v. British Columbia Council of Human Rights and Harvinder Singh Grewal* (1993). This was a complex appeal case involving many details that can be omitted here. Grewal, a native speaker of Punjabi, was denied a job as a laborer at a sawmill, ostensibly because his English was inadequate for him to understand instructions that might be given on the job and because his limited language skills might create a safety risk. In its decision the appeal court did not find that the employer had discriminated against Grewal. Of course, a decision such as this raises the question of how an adjudicating body makes a decision as to the appropriateness of a language proficiency requirement in any particular job and whether or not that proficiency requirement is met. I return to this problem in the discussion below.

A Typology of Accent Discrimination Cases

In the sections that follow, I consider three broad types of cases.

1. Cases in which accent is an aspect of language proficiency considered in hiring decisions;
2. Cases of discrimination in employment and tenancy due to accent stereotyping;
3. Cases of harassment of second-language users in which accent is a factor.

Accent, Language Proficiency, and the Notion of Bona Fide Occupational Requirement

Many accent discrimination cases presented before tribunals raise the issue of L2 users' abilities to carry out employment in which language skills are required. In one human rights ruling from British Columbia (*Mirek Gajecki v. Board of School Trustees, School District No. 36 [Surrey]*, 1990), concern by an employer about a teacher's accent resulted in discrimination. When Gajecki came to Canada from Poland in 1970, he obtained a Quebec teaching certifi-

cate in Montreal and taught at a technical institute there. In 1979 he moved to Vancouver, where he worked as a substitute teacher at the high school level, teaching mathematics, computer science, and physics. Gajecki had a satisfactory teaching record and had been evaluated as competent at teaching in these subject areas. Nevertheless, a director of instruction, advised Gajecki that the School Board had concerns about his accent. Subsequently, he was not contacted for substitute teaching work. An inquiry from the Surrey Teachers' Association revealed that a clerical worker had placed a note on Gajecki's file saying that Gajecki "did not speak English." Although I have omitted a number of secondary details in this case, the essence of Gajecki's complaint was that he was not dispatched as a substitute teacher because of his accent. In fact when the School Board became aware of the note on his file, Gajecki was once again placed on the list of substitutes and was employed every day of the following school year. The tribunal upheld his complaint and ordered the School Board to pay compensation of \$630 for lost wages and \$2,000 for hurt, indignity, and embarrassment.

Of particular importance in this case was the fact that the respondent did not deny having concerns about Gajecki's accent. In fact a School Board representative testified at the tribunal that a teacher's accent might have two kinds of adverse consequences: "kids might seize on mispronounced words and fool around with it and whether or not the children would understand the teacher [sic]" (p. D/331). But the School Board presented no evidence that Gajecki's accent had ever interfered with his work, and the fact that Gajecki was invited to return to the classroom immediately after discovery of the note on his file suggests that the concern about his accent was hypothetical.

The case of *Jacques Clau v. Uniglobe Pacific Travel* (1995) resulted in a different outcome. Clau, who was born in France, moved to Canada at the age of 12. Before filing his complaint, he had briefly carried out interning work at a Victoria travel agency, where he later applied for a job. However, in a telephone conversation with him, the branch manager indicated that Clau would not be hired because clients and other employees had a difficult time understanding him. Clau's complaint, alleging that he was not hired because of his French accent, was dismissed. Although the adjudicator's decision was based partly on Clau's lack of credibility (he contradicted himself at times during testimony), some additional important pieces of information also played a role. First, several witnesses who worked for the agency testified that they had found Clau difficult to understand over the telephone. Second, the respondent had in its employ other workers who spoke with French accents. And finally, although it was not a critical issue in the case, the adjudicator herself noted that she found Clau difficult to understand at points during the hearing.

In a comparable case, *Roberto Guillen v. R. Dufour Enterprises Ltd.* (British Columbia Human Rights Commission, 1995), a worker who was hired by a

trucking company to carry out clerical duties complained that he had been dismissed because of his Spanish accent. However, at tribunal, the respondent argued that the worker had experienced communication problems with customers over the telephone and had confused some of their orders. On the basis of testimony from other employees and supervisors, the adjudicator accepted this explanation and determined that "the Respondent terminated Guillen because accent created communication problems which had negatively affected his work performance" (p. 15). The complainant's case was therefore not upheld.

Decisions in cases such as these can be difficult to make. First, it must be determined whether a BFOR for language proficiency existed in the workplace. In these three cases, it seems obvious that high level oral English skills were necessary. However, it must also be established whether the employee's language skills met the requirements of the job. In these (and other cases) testimony from other employees or customers may be used to arrive at a decision. One obvious limitation of this approach is that witnesses might present biased or conflicting testimony, and the adjudicator might ultimately have to make a judgment based on the credibility of witnesses. From a linguistic perspective two other approaches might be considered:

1. The use of expert witnesses (e.g., applied linguists with expertise in the assessment of language skills) to determine whether an employee is proficient enough to carry out a job;
2. The use of standard test scores (e.g., on the *Test of Spoken English*® as a means of determining job qualifications, as proposed in the United States by Nguyen (1993).

However, at present neither of these is a practical alternative (see Munro, 2003, for a discussion of related issues). In general, human rights commissions do not have the financial resources required to pay for expert witnesses, and the notion of using test scores merely raises the question of how one would determine an acceptable test score for any particular job.

Accent Stereotyping

Recently, in the US, concerns have arisen about the use of so-called linguistic profiling as a means of assessing potential tenants or employees. For example, on hearing a voice on the telephone, a landlord might deny accommodation to someone because the speaker is perceived to be of a particular race or from a particular place of origin. In fact research involving large numbers of untrained listeners hearing speech over the telephone has indicated that they can often guess the race or ethnicity of speakers after hearing them say only the word *hello* (Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999). Unfortunately, the term *linguistic profiling* carries the unfortunate connotation of some sort of systematic, respectable, or even "scientific" evaluation of speakers, even though discrimination of this type is anything but precise or well

informed. Although interlocutors often make accurate guesses about a speaker's first-language background, they may also make errors. In her attitudinal study, Sato (1998), for example, noted that when some of her listeners misperceived a speaker with a Ukrainian accent as having an Aboriginal background, they assigned the speaker a more negative personality rating than they gave to other Ukrainian speakers. Because of such potential inaccuracies and the fundamentally dishonest purposes involved, I prefer to refer to the phenomenon described in this section as accent stereotyping.

Cases like these differ from the BFOR cases described above in that accent is not explicitly identified by an employer (or landlord) as a factor under consideration. In one recently settled case (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2001) a woman of Cree background in North Battleford was told on the telephone that an apartment she wished to view had already been rented. When a friend who spoke without an Aboriginal accent called the same manager, she was told that the suite was still available. It appears, then, that the landlord, not wishing to rent to a person from an Aboriginal background, had used linguistic cues to identify the woman's ancestry. In a settlement that did not involve a tribunal hearing, the respondent agreed to pay \$550 in compensation to the complainant and to post a statement in the apartment building describing an anti-discrimination policy.

A somewhat ambiguous but similar case was that of *Mehdi Najari v. Dennis Wayne Cook doing business as Province Wide Traffic Control Ltd.* (1993). Mr. Najari was an Iranian refugee with a noticeable accent, who sought employment as a traffic controller (flag person) by responding to an advertisement in a Victoria newspaper. The advertisement instructed potential applicants to apply by telephone after 6:00 p.m. When Najari placed a call at a few minutes after six, he was told that all the positions were filled. This seemed suspicious to him, so he asked his neighbor, a woman who spoke with a general Canadian accent, to call the same number. About an hour and a half later, the respondent told her that some openings still remained and asked whether she was interested in a position. After she explained that she was calling on behalf of a man from another country, the respondent suddenly changed his mind about the availability of positions and indicated to her that she should call back in a few months. Not surprisingly, the tribunal ruled in favor of Najari and awarded him \$2,000 for humiliation. However, it was not possible to establish whether he experienced discrimination on the basis of place of origin because of his accent, or on the basis of his sex (women are sometimes favored for the type of job he applied for).

Perhaps the most important point in the two cases described above was the availability of a witness who could verify that different responses were received by speakers with different accents. In fact a demonstration that

accent stereotyping has occurred frequently hinges on the availability of this type of evidence.

Harassment Based on Accent

A third category of cases involves situations in which L2 users are ridiculed or subjected to uncalled-for criticism of their language skills. For example, although accent was not directly an issue, language figured importantly in a case involving a "poisoned" work environment in which Spanish-speaking employees were repeatedly subjected to bullying and denigrating comments (*Luis Espinoza and Ontario Human Rights Commission v. Coldmatic Refrigeration of Canada*, 1997). They were belittled by supervisors for their limited English skills (even though a command of English was not a requirement for employment) and called "ignorant Spanish speakers." Ironically, the owner of the company responsible for the discrimination was an immigrant and L2 user of English himself. A critical point in this case was that the belittling of employees' language skills was seen as a form of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and place of origin.

Accent was a tangential issue in the case of *Balbir Singh Ahlwat v. Corporation of the District of Surrey* (1990). In that case, the BC Human Rights Council found that Ahlwat, a guard at the Surrey jail, had been the target of a number of racist comments and awarded him \$2,000 for humiliation. At the hearing Ahlwat testified that another employee had on occasion mimicked his accent and gestures.

In the case of *Cecilia Segula v. Pat Ferrante and Ball Packaging Products Inc.* (1997), the complainant alleged that over a period of four years she had received negative comments from her employer regarding her accent and her "broken English." She was also advised to take English courses, presumably to improve her accent. Segula, an immigrant from Yugoslavia, had arrived in Canada in 1957 at the age of 17. Like most other late learners of English, she had a noticeable accent even after living in Canada for 30 years. At the time of the alleged comments, she had been working for the respondent for about 14 years, and her ability to carry out her duties had never been at issue. In fact her data-processing job required only limited oral skills, and even so there was no evidence that her accent made her difficult to understand. The Ontario Board of Inquiry upheld the complaint and awarded Segula \$3,000.

In order to understand why the kind of harassment observed in the latter case is so hurtful, it is important to consider the evidence from research on accents discussed above. After so many years in Canada, it seems improbable that Segula would have shown much, if any, change in her English language skills even if she had received extensive language instruction. Thus the harassment over her accent entailed shaming based on a characteristic

that was unlikely to change substantially. Even more troubling was the fact that this characteristic had nothing to do with her job performance.

Conclusions: The Role of ESL Teachers

There is no doubt that negative attitudes toward accented speech exist in this country and that cases of accent discrimination have occurred, although the extent of these problems has not been determined. The human rights process provides L2 users with a means of resolving potential cases of discrimination and may serve as a means of educating the public about acceptable kinds of behavior in the treatment of people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Nevertheless, a positive change in attitudes toward L2 users may depend on an improved understanding on the part of the public of the nature of second-language learning. Here ESL teachers may be able to play a valuable role, provided they have the kinds of knowledge and attitudes necessary to promote acceptance of linguistic diversity.

Although most teachers are not in a position to influence public attitudes dramatically, it is possible to enumerate several specific ways in which teachers can work to reduce accent discrimination.

1. *Be informed about fundamental issues in phonetics and their relevance to pedagogy.* In a survey of attitudes about pronunciation, Breitkreutz, Derwing, and Rossiter (2001) found that few ESL teachers recalled having any formal training in pronunciation teaching. Yet an appreciation of the difference between the notions of accent and intelligibility is indispensable if teachers are to be effective in the classroom. For example, teachers need to be aware that errors in rhythm and stress can cause communication breakdowns, whereas many common segmental problems, such as saying “tink” instead of “think” are unlikely to have serious consequences for a learner of English. In fact this distinction—between speech patterns that actually hamper communication and speech patterns that merely cause one to sound “foreign”—is exactly the distinction that must be made in the BFOR cases discussed above. If teachers make it clear to students that some aspects of accent do not reduce intelligibility, they can help students recognize that there is no need for “accent elimination,” and that “accent reduction” does not necessarily lead to better communication.
2. *Reflect critically on how the public views accented speech, and work to convey positive attitudes in the ESL classroom.* Both teachers and students need to accept that having an accent is a normal aspect of second-language learning, particularly for adult learners. In fact research indicates that almost all late L2 learners retain an accent throughout their lives. Frank classroom discussions of the nature of foreign accents (in connection with pronunciation exercises) may help ESL learners come to view

having an accent as simply a marker of one's linguistic experience, rather than as something to be ashamed of. Teachers should make clear to students that when they learn pronunciation skills, the goal is not to sound exactly like native speakers, but to enhance communication. Discussions of this sort might help prevent cases of accent discrimination by L2 users themselves, as in the harassment case described above.

3. *Teach students about the human rights process in Canada.* Discuss their rights and the action they may take if they believe that they have experienced discrimination because of their language skills.
4. *Speak out in the community against misinformed attitudes about language and accent that are sometimes conveyed through media reports and advertising.* It is easy to find examples of writers and publishers who claim that their textbooks and multimedia materials will help ESL learners eliminate foreign accents. There is no reason to believe that any materials can live up to such an outrageous claim. More important, there is no reason why L2 learners should be expected to eliminate their foreign accents.
5. *Work within the broader community to support aspects of human rights legislation that benefit L2 users.* This is particularly important at a time when budget cutbacks convey to the public the false impression that human rights legislation is superfluous or too costly to support. In 2002 the Government of British Columbia announced its intention to abolish the BC Human Rights Commission, a move that will make BC the only province in the country without such a body. Although human rights legislation will probably remain in place in BC, access to the government services that ensure the fair investigation and resolution of complaints is apt to be severely compromised, and public education programs may cease altogether. There is little justification for this move. BC's budget allocation for human rights has traditionally represented only a tiny proportion of government spending. It is important for ESL teachers actively to oppose actions that adversely affect Canada's immigrant community.

Notes

¹In British Columbia in 2000-2001, for example, about 16% of human rights complaints accepted for investigation were ultimately referred to tribunal (British Columbia Human Rights Commission, 2001). If the total number of complaints received were considered, including those not accepted, this percentage would be much smaller.

²Now called the BC Human Rights Commission.

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