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JURISDICTIONS AND THE STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN QUEBEC* 1/

Paper presented by Canada

* Paper prepared by Mr. Bonnelly, geographer with the secretariat of the
Quebec Geographical Commission.

1/ The French version of this paper appears in a special issue of the
bulletin "CANOMA", vol. 3, No. 1, which will be distributed at the Conference.

JURISDICTIONS AND THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN QUEBEC*

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The problems raised by the implementation of acts and regulations governing toponymic standardization have only recently become the concern of researchers. Although there has been much pragmatic research (surveys or inventories) and also much scientific research in toponymy, up until the past few years the field had almost never been approached from a legal perspective, despite the fact that this is an important facet of standardization.

Yet the jurisdictional problems arising from the standardization of geographical names become all the more significant, at both the national and international levels, in the preparation of directories and atlases and in the writing of treaties, statutes and regulations, publicity material and addresses. The absence of a proper allocation of jurisdictions in this area leads to a form of anarchy that is hardly justifiable.

Confronted with the innumerable problems raised by this situation, the Quebec Geographical Commission decided in February 1975 to set up an ad hoc committee to determine the primary causes of this disorder and to present the Commission with different proposals for improving the administration of Quebec's toponymy with a view to standardization.

1. Chaotic state of choronymy in Quebec

About a year before the ad hoc committee launched into its studies on choronymic jurisdictions, two jurists, MM Dominique Alh eriti ere and Jean-Paul Lacasse, showed in a study 2/ on current legal problems in Quebec's geographical nomenclature that a large number of organizations performed some choronymic activity (principal activity, or a subsidiary control or creating activity), that authority in matters of choronymy varied considerably from one organization to another and even frequently conflicted, and that there were a large number of statutes dealing with choronymy.

1.1 Multiplicity of sources of nomenclature

By virtue of powers delegated to them or else through established custom, several organizations or individuals exert considerable influence in their respective domains on Quebec's geographical nomenclature.

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2/ ALHERITIERE, Dominique and LACASSE, Jean-Paul, Les Juridictions choronymiques au Quebec. Quebec, GECET, Laval University, 1974, typescript, 127 pp.

This is true, for example, of the Quebec Department of Transport, the federal Ministry of Transport, the Canadian Transport Commission, and the Quebec Autoroutes Board with respect to railways, airports, canals, highways and freeways. It is also true of the federal Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs and its Quebec counterpart, the Department of Financial Institutions, Companies and Co-operatives, with respect to company names with a geographical component. It applies to the federal Post Office Department with respect to the establishment of post offices and to the Department of Municipal Affairs with respect to the choice of names for municipalities; it can also be said of the municipalities themselves with respect to the naming of streets and of the Department of Tourism with respect to the naming of parks, sanctuaries and so on.

And of course there is virtually no limit to the number of private organizations and individuals - ranging from prospectors to real-estate promoters to open-air sports enthusiasts - who may affect our toponymy in one way or another.

1.2 Multiplicity of legal texts

Although Quebec has but a single statute dealing specifically with toponymy (the Geographical Commission Act), there are numerous other legal provisions referring to geographical names in statutes enforced by other departments.

Furthermore, in a number of instances orders-in-council, regulations and resolutions have been specifically adopted to determine certain geographical names.

Finally, there are a very large number of legislative texts that establish legal usage in respect of place names, though not expressly determining them.

In the light of these factors, the Committee therefore concluded that despite the act establishing the Commission, the latter was operating within a veritable labyrinth of acts, regulations and decisional powers that seriously limited its authority and as a result hampered the standardization of geographical names in Quebec.

1.3 Consequences

It is clearly apparent that the execution of the various statutory provisions referring to toponymy and the numerous decisions made by various departments on Quebec toponymy often make the Geographical Commission Act inoperative.

Far from tending toward a degree of uniformity and standardization, as would be desirable, the toponymy currently established by the public administration is so inaccurate and incoherent as to be virtually unacceptable.

Because of this ignorance and failure to observe the elementary rules of choosing and writing geographical names, we have been witnessing the establishment of parallel toponyms. These spread confusion among users, entail considerable losses of money, markedly reduce administrative financial performance and in certain cases threaten public safety.

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2. Solutions

In view of the multiple drawbacks caused by excessive laxness in the defining of toponymy jurisdictions, the Committee was instructed to propose to the Geographical Commission various solutions for remedying the situation and devising a more satisfactory method of dealing with geographical names with a view to a greater degree of standardization.

There were three primary objectives - making Quebec's position in its negotiations with the other levels of government more coherent, making government publications reliable for reference purposes, and ensuring that Quebec's toponyms reflected the province's cultural and territorial policy - and the proposed solutions on the whole tended toward consolidation of the Commission's powers.

The Committee considered it requisite that the authority of a central agency, responsible for controlling Quebec's geographical nomenclature, be confirmed as soon as possible. This control, which involves the stages or operations of collecting, naming, processing, extending official recognition to and publicizing, should be more or less absolute depending on the toponymic level. Hence the control powers of the Geographical Commission should be exclusive with respect to the names of natural geographical features, but also preponderant with respect to other designated space, as, for example, all types of administrative divisions or public thoroughfares outside municipal or metropolitan settings. In addition, the Commission should be free to serve municipal organizations in an advisory capacity and could even act as an umpire in disputes concerning the choice and handling of geographical names for which they are responsible (particularly the names of streets).

3. The means

To achieve the necessary objective of confirming a sole authority in the matter, which constitutes a prerequisite to any effective reform of toponymy management in Quebec, the Committee has formulated 19 recommendations, several of which are designed to overcome the administrative constraints that may result from such action.

These recommendations assume that it will be possible - and necessary - to proceed with legislative amendments to consolidate the powers of the Geographical Commission. To this end, specifying the powers of the Commission in the Act is obviously necessary.

A newer and more effective Geographical Commission or Toponymy Commission Act would serve to recognize and substantiate the Commission's authority, which is scattered now because of the multiplicity of texts and toponymic practices. It would also correct our present situation, which is characterized by a multitude of incorrect, extraneous and parallel geographical names dotted throughout the province - the legacy of naming by too many organizations.

4. Conclusion

The positive attitude to greater administrative efficiency which has been demonstrated by the present Government and the keen interest that it has shown in revision of the Official Language Act give us reason to believe that a solution will be proposed to remedy, once and for all, the problem of jurisdictions for geographical names. A project to standardize toponymy more extensively should become reality in the very near future.
