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SECTION 21
Existing Language Rights

Compilation of primary documents to assist in interpreting the public
meaning of Section 21 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*

Second Edition

August, 2025



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The Constitution Act, 1982
Part I. Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
Official Languages of Canada

Continuation of existing constitutional provisions

Section 21 *Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any rights, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.*

PART 1:

Drafting History of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms Pertaining to Section 21's Public Meaning

Drafts of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms:

January 22, 1979: Proposed Charter of Rights & Freedoms, Ontario Draft tabled at the Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution (January 22-24, 1979)

October 17, 1979: Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation, Federal Draft, tabled at the Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution (October 22-23, 1979)

November 5, 1979: Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation, Federal Draft, tabled at the Meeting of Officials on the Constitution (November 15-16, 1979)

July 4, 1980: Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution, Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation, Discussion Draft (July 8-11, 1980)

July 4, 1980: Comité Permanent des Ministres sur la Constitution, Droits et Libertés à l'Interieur de la Fédération Canadienne, Document de Travail (July 8-11, 1980)

July 16, 1980: Revised Discussion Draft with Memo re Section 1 (July 18, 1980)

August 5, 1980: Revised Discussion Draft with Memo (August 5, 1980)

August 8, 1980: Formalities to Bill: Joint Resolution (August 8, 1980)

August 22, 1980: Discussion Draft (Federal) (August 26-29, 1980)

September 3, 1980: Revised Discussion Draft (September 8-12, 1980)

September 3, 1980 : Conference Fédérale-Provinciale des Premiers Ministres, Document de Travail, Charte Canadienne des Droits et Libertés (September 3, 1980)

September 24, 1980: Resolution for joint address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the constitution of Canada (September 24, 1980)

October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada with Handwritten Notes [Draft, Version1] (October 2, 1980)

October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada with Handwritten Notes [Draft, Version 2] (October 2, 1980)

October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada

December 12, 1980: Draft [No Title]

January 9-12, 1981: Briefing Book for Clause by Clause Consideration of the Resolution (January 1981)

January 12, 1981: Version formally presented to Special Joint Committee by Jean Chretien (January 12, 1981)

Statutes and International Agreements:

1978: Bill C-60: An Act to amend the Constitution of Canada

[This section is incomplete]

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Drafts of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms

January 22, 1979: Proposed Charter of Rights & Freedoms, Ontario Draft tabled at the Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution (January 22-24, 1979)

16. Nothing in sections 10 to 15 abrogates or derogates from any legal or customary right or privilege acquired or enjoyed either before or after the commencement of this Act with respect to English or French, and any other language in Canada.

(Source: Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution, *Proposed Charter of Rights & Freedoms, Ontario Draft*, Doc 830-70/042 (Vancouver: 22-24 January, 1979). Click [HERE](#))

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October 17, 1979: Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation, Federal Draft, tabled at the Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution (October 22-23, 1979)

22. Nothing in sections 8 to 10 and 12 to 14 abrogates or derogates from right; privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution, *Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation Federal Draft*, [October 17, 1979] (Halifax: 22-23 October, 1979). Click [HERE](#))

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November 5, 1979: Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation, Federal Draft, tabled at the Meeting of Officials on the Constitution (November 15-16, 1979)

22. Nothing in sections 8 to 10 and 12 to 14 abrogates or derogates from right; privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.*

[NOTE:* This provision has application until such time as specific provisions in the present Constitution may be repealed.]

(Source: Meeting of Officials on the Constitution, *Rights & Freedoms within Canadian Federation, Federal Draft*, [November 5, 1979], Doc 840-177/005 (Toronto: 15-16 November, 1979). Click [HERE](#))

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July 4, 1980: Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution, Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation, Discussion Draft

22. Nothing in sections 11 to 13 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada. (1)

(1) This provision has application until such time as specific provisions in the present Constitution may be repealed.

(Source: Meeting of the Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution, *Rights and Freedoms within the Canadian Federation, Discussion Draft*. Tabled by the Delegation of the Government of Canada, 4 July 1980, Doc 830-81/027 (Montreal: 8-11 July 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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July 16, 1980: Revised Discussion Draft with Memo re Section 1

22. Nothing in sections 11 to 13 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada. (1)

(1) This provision has application until such time as specific provisions in the present Constitution may be repealed.

(Source: Memo from Fred Jordan to Roger Tassé re Charter of Rights – Possible Modifications [with Possible Alternatives to Section 1 of July 4, 1980 Draft & Revised Discussion Draft (16 July 1980)] (18 July 1980). This text is found on p. 2. Click [HERE](#).)

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August 5, 1980: Revised Discussion Draft with Memo

30. Nothing in sections 19 to 21 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada. (*)

(* Transitional provisions will be required for repeal of these provisions at an appropriate time.)

(Source: Memo from Deputy Minister of Justice to Prime Minister, Charter of Rights incl. Discussion Draft, *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (5 August 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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August 8, 1980: Formalities to Bill: Joint Resolution

95.37. Nothing in sections 95.26 to 95.28 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada. (1)

(Source: Canada, Formalities to Bill, Draft Joint Resolution, An Act to Amend the Constitution of Canada (8 August 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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August 22, 1980: Discussion Draft (Federal)

30. Nothing in sections 19 to 21 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada. (*)

(* Transitional provisions will be required for repeal of these provisions at an appropriate time.)

(Source: Continuing Committee of Ministers on the Constitution, *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Discussion Draft [Federal]*, (August 22, 1980), Doc 830-84/004 (Ottawa: 26-29 August 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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September 3, 1980: Revised Discussion Draft

28. Nothing in sections 17 to 19 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada. (*)

(Source: Federal-Provincial First Ministers' Conference, *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Revised Discussion Draft, Federal*, [September 3, 1980] Doc 800-14/064 (Ottawa: 8-12 September 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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September 24, 1980: Resolution for joint address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the constitution of Canada

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 19 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, DRAFT, "Resolution for joint address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the constitution of Canada" (24 September 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada with Handwritten Notes [Draft, Version1]

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, DRAFT, Proposed Resolution for Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen Respecting the Constitution of Canada, Version 1 (2 October 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada with Handwritten Notes [Draft, Version 2]

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, DRAFT, Proposed Resolution for Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen Respecting the Constitution of Canada, Version 2 with Handwritten Notes (2 October 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, "Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada" in *Sessional Papers* (1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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December 12, 1980: Draft [No Title]

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of ~~the~~^[them], that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: [Department of Justice?], [DRAFT], Constitution Act, 1980. Click [HERE](#).)

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January 9-12, 1981: Briefing Book for Clause by Clause Consideration of the Resolution:

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Canada, *Briefing Book for Clause by Clause Consideration of the Resolution* (January 1981). Click [HERE](#).)

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January 12, 1981: Version formally presented to Special Joint Committee by Jean Chretien¹

21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and of the House of Commons on the Constitution of Canada*, 32nd Parl, 1st Sess, No 36 (12 January 1981). Click [HERE](#).)

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¹ See also [January 9-12, 1981: Briefing Book for Clause by Clause Consideration of the Resolution](#).

French:

July 4, 1980: Comité Permanent des Ministres sur la Constitution, Droits et Libertés à l'Interieur de la Fédération Canadienne, Document de Travail

22. Les articles 11 à 13 n'ont pas pour effet de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations relatifs à la langue française ou anglaise, ou à ces deux langues, qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada. (1)

NOTE: (1) Cette disposition s'applique jusqu'à ce que certaines dispositions de la Constitution actuelle puissent être abrogées.

(Source: Comité Permanent des Ministres sur la Constitution, *Droits et Libertés à l'Interieur de la Fédération Canadienne, Document de Travail*, Doc: 830-81/027 (Montréal: 8-11 juillet 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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September 3, 1980: Conference Fédérale-Provinciale des Premiers Ministres, Document de Travail, Charte Canadienne des Droits et Libertés

28. Les articles 17 à 19 n'ont pas pour effet de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations relatifs à la langue française ou anglaise, ou à ces deux langues, qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada. (1)

NOTE : (1) Cette disposition s'applique jusqu'à ce que certaines dispositions de la Constitution actuelle puissent être abrogées

(Source: Conference Fédérale-Provinciale des Premiers Ministres, *Document de Travail, Charte Canadienne des Droits et Libertés* (3 septembre 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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September 24, 1980: Resolution for joint address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the constitution of Canada

28. Les articles 16 à 19 n'ont pas pour effet, en ce qui a trait à la langue française ou anglaise ou à ces deux langues, de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, DRAFT, "Resolution for joint address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the constitution of Canada" (24 September 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada with Handwritten Notes [Draft, Version1]

21. Les articles 16 à 20 n'ont pas pour effet, en ce qui a trait à la langue française ou anglaise ou à ces deux langues, de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, DRAFT, Proposed Resolution for Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen Respecting the Constitution of Canada, Version 1 (2 October 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada with Handwritten Notes [Draft, Version 2]

21. Les articles 16 à 20 n'ont pas pour effet, en ce qui a trait à la langue française ou anglaise ou à ces deux langues, de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, DRAFT, Proposed Resolution for Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen Respecting the Constitution of Canada, Version 2 with Handwritten Notes (2 October 1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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October 2, 1980: Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada

21. Les articles 16 à 20 n'ont pas pour effet, en ce qui a trait à la langue française ou anglaise ou à ces deux langues, de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parliament, "Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada" in *Sessional Papers* (1980). Click [HERE](#).)

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January 9-12, 1981: Briefing Book for Clause by Clause Consideration of the Resolution:

21. Les articles 16 à 20 n'ont pas pour effet, en ce qui a trait à la langue française ou anglaise ou à ces deux langues, de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada.

(Source: Canada, *Briefing Book for Clause by Clause Consideration of the Resolution* (January 1981). Click [HERE](#).)

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January 12, 1981: Version formally presented to Special Joint Committee by Jean Chretien:

21. Les articles 16 à 20 n'ont pas pour effet, en ce qui a trait à la langue française ou anglaise ou à ces deux langues, de porter atteinte aux droits, privilèges ou obligations qui existent ou sont maintenus aux termes d'une autre disposition de la Constitution du Canada.

(Source: Canada, Parlement, *Procès-verbaux et témoignages du Comité mixte spécial du Sénat et de la Chambre des communes sur la Constitution du Canada*, 32e parl, 1re sess, n° 36 (12 janvier 1981). Click [HERE](#).)

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Statutes and International Agreements

June 20, 1978: Bill C-60: An Act to amend the Constitution of Canada

18. Nothing in sections 14 to 17 shall be held to abrogate, abridge or derogate from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada.

(Source: Bill C-60, *An Act to amend the Constitution of Canada with respect to matters coming within the legislative authority of the Parliament of Canada, and to approve and authorize the taking of measures necessary for the amendment of the Constitution with respect to certain other matters*, 3rd Sess, 30th Parl, SC, 1978 (June 20, 1978). Click [HERE](#))

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