

THE WORLD IN MICROCOSM

IT WOULD BE HARD to think of a Royal Commission more conscious of the historic nature of its task than that on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which began its work in 1963 and only four years afterwards, at the end of 1967, started to publish, volume by volume, its massive report. So aware were the Commissioners of the serious division of attitudes between English and French Canadians that in 1965, before they were half way through their massive task of investigation and research, they published a preliminary report which undoubtedly played a great part in initiating the profound changes that have taken place in the English Canadian viewpoint during the past two years.

Book One — now issued — of the definitive Report is concerned with the “official languages”, and with the need for the French-speaking Canadian, even where he is in a small minority, to be able to carry on official business and gain education and justice — as the English Canadian can do in Quebec — in his own language. This, the Commissioners believe, will necessitate the extension of official bilingualism to Ontario and New Brunswick as bilingual provinces, and to the creation of bilingual districts in other provinces, wherever a tenth of the population in any appreciable area is French-speaking. Undoubtedly these measures, which may well be law by the time these words appear, will not only play their part in easing tensions between the two principal “nations” in Canada; they will also help, by encouraging local nuclei of French culture, to enrich the lives we all live.

It seems an inconsistency that only one out of ten Commissioners should have suggested that similar facilities be extended to other minorities in Canada. The demand of this Commissioner, J. B. Rudnycky, is not that any other language should be *nationally* equal to French and English, but that where a minority

reaches 10% — as Ukrainian, German and Italian minorities do in some regions of Canada — their language should be *regionally* official. No reason is given why the other Commissioners did not accept this demand, which on the surface seems in the spirit of their general approach. The Commission, after all, rather proudly claims that Canada, unlike America, has never accepted the philosophy of the “melting pot”. “With its wealth of human, linguistic, and cultural resources,” it asserts, “Canada reflects the world in microcosm.” Wonderful, but, if so, why not give these microcosmic fragments of the world formed by our lesser cultures a reasonable degree of support, at least equal to that proposed for English and French Canadians where they are minorities? It might bring considerable dividends. It is true that the less widely spoken languages have produced — if one can judge from such translations as exist — no literatures in Canada comparable to those of the French and English, but the recognition that such languages are not mere baggage to be shed in the rush for assimilation might have an unpredictably stimulating effect.

However, the consideration of arts and letters, and of the mass media, belongs to later volumes of the Commission’s Report, which apparently will not be available for some months ahead, and which we shall anticipate with the greatest interest, among other reasons because the Commissioners include men well aware of the life of the arts and the intellect, not only in both the Canadas, but in all of them.