

Province overcoming challenges to bilingualism: commissioner

By **EVERTON McLEAN**

THE TELEGRAM

Graham Fraser, the federal Commissioner of Official Languages, says while this province's French-speaking people, as well as those who wish to learn the language, face significant challenges the province is doing a good job of working to make services and educational program available.

Fraser is in St. John's this week, meeting with representatives from both official languages.

"Part of it is just simply as commissioner to visit Newfoundland and Labrador to see what is on the ground," he said.

"I visited two schools, I've talked to people from the francophone minority community ... It's been a mixture of finding out what people's particular challenges are, in terms of official languages, and encouraging them."

He said he was impressed by the efforts being made by the provincial

government and federal public servants to provide French-language services to the minority population.

He said that, in Newfoundland, federal public servants are not required to be bilingual, as less than five per cent of people here speak French as a first language.

However, many public servants wish to have the ability, especially since it's required if they choose to advance through the civil service.

It can be a challenge for them to learn the language here, though, simply because of the small francophone community.

As a result, he said, they are pushing for more funding for language programs because resources for learning in the community aren't always readily available.

"That's an extra challenge for people, like the people here who are taking French-language training."

Fraser also said the province faces challenges providing services because of the dispersed nature of the francophone community, which

is split largely between the St. John's area, Port au Port and Labrador West. However, he believes the province is making a good effort to ensure francophones have adequate services in those areas.

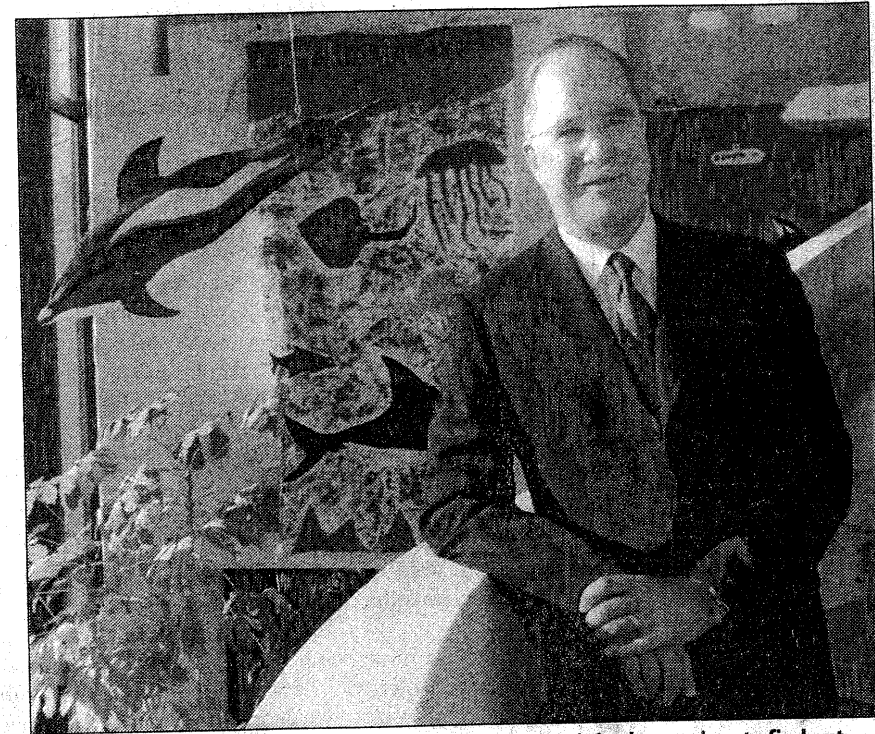
As well, Fraser said some students in the province are disadvantaged because Newfoundland and Labrador has a smaller number of teachers capable of teaching French in schools, particularly in rural communities.

He said one option may be an exchange program with French communities in Quebec or other parts of Canada, trading French teachers with English teachers.

As well, he said Memorial university could recognize the need for French teachers and encourage people studying to be teachers to pursue that specialty.

He said French-language teachers will be in high demand in the future.

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The Commissioner of Official Languages, Graham Fraser, is in the province to find out about Newfoundland and Labrador's French-speaking community and about learning French as a second language. — Photo by Rhonda Hayward/The Telegram