



# Oral History:

## Jerry Lee Miller on the Canada Literacy Act

**In the early 1990s, the Movement for Canadian Literacy worked to develop the Canada Literacy Act.**

The Act would have created an environment of equality for all people regardless of their level of literacy skills. It was never read in Parliament. In this interview, Jerry Lee Miller, a member of the Learner Action Group, reflects on what the Act could have meant.

**Jerry Lee Miller:** The Canada Literacy Act passes. Now, how I imagined it would be? Well, let's look to Star Trek. On Star Trek everybody has a great education, nobody reads friggin' book except for Picard, and he does it because it's a hobby. When I take apart Star Trek and the things that I like in it—is how it operates as a community, everybody is educated to their maximum level, people are provided with lots of information—it appears that way anyway. There is a structure that's interested in trying to elevate people to the best that they can possibly be.

Now that is what I imagined the Act was going to do. It would involve everybody. Everybody would be involved with it. People would see that this one is one that they can fix, that we would spend the next ten years working diligently towards trying to make Canada as literate as it possibly can be. And it would fundamentally change everything. You'd be able to rent a car easily, regardless of who you are. Your lawyer would be making sure that you could understand every nuance of your leasing agreement for your new apartment. People would be helping people, directing them on the streets without a second thought about whether they could read or write or understand the signs. You'd be able to walk into any office anywhere and they would be more than happy to provide you with information. We would be raising a generation of students, university and college students, who would be more than happy to share with you all that they had

learned in their four or five or ten years of university.

None of these things happened. They didn't happen and the Act didn't pass but I still have hope. But it was supposed to be an Act that anybody and everybody could see their part in it. And it would bring us all closer together.

The Act would've brought clear language into the foreground. Right now, it's still kind of a misty area because people think that simple language is clear language when it isn't. Clear language means **clear**—crystal clear—crystal clear, understandable language. The Act would have helped to promote, push that to the foreground. People who were learning how to read would have entry level materials available for them through government organizations. People who already had a handle on the reading and writing would be put in a position where they would be mandated, or persondated, into sharing and being patient in providing the information that they know or helping people to access the information more readily.

The responsibility would be everyone's. People would be looking for people who couldn't read and write and looking to assist them, that's what the Act would have done. It would have made environments, wherever people worked, where they would have to be more sensitive to the possibility that there might be people who can't access reading and writing and make it their responsibility to help those people. And responsibility didn't mean throwing tons of money at it. It meant the Act was operating more on what you can do, you know, what **you** can do for other people, **not** what the government can do. It was to take it out of the hands of the government—make them responsible, but take it out of their hands—and put it into the hands of Canadians as individuals, as groups, as organizations, as corporations, put it into their hands to solve the problem.

**To read the entire discussion, go to [www.literacyjournal.ca](http://www.literacyjournal.ca) and click on Special Projects. ■**

**Jerry Lee Miller** has participated in community-based and school board literacy programs as a learner, a facilitator, an activist, an outreach worker, an illustrator and artist, a researcher and project coordinator and board member of various organizations, including MCL. You can see a recent project, The Love of Homework, at [www.nald.ca/schalp/homework/index.html](http://www.nald.ca/schalp/homework/index.html). Feel free to e-mail him at [jerryleemiller@hotmail.com](mailto:jerryleemiller@hotmail.com).