

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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"For Want of a Paul Revere"

339 Mountbatten
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada K1H 5W2
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

There is no competent approach to English-French relations in Canada that excludes history. This isn't saying much, since one can scarcely comprehend any troubled political, cultural, ethnic or linguistic relationship anywhere in the world without paying due respect to the past. History, after all, is what one of my college professors liked to call "the present in depth." But for most North Americans, whether they be recent immigrants or several generations removed from the trauma and jubilation of resettlement in a new land, the past is something to forget, to escape, or to simply pass over in favor of futuristic speculation. History is not our strong suit.

This is one reason why, I suppose, a newly-arrived political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa could quickly dismiss the description of Canada as a bilingual, multicultural state as "sheer nonsense". His reading of the current situation may be fairly accurate (as I've mentioned before, things are not going very smoothly at the moment for the proponents of national unity), but his sense of the past seems at best superficial.

The several American officials I have met here are more than eager to demonstrate their intellectual prowess and ability to "hit the ground running" by making bold, almost provocative statements straight away, without pause or deference to uncertainty. In an introductory telephone conversation with another, higher ranking officer, my first mention of the word "multicultural" elicited a conclusive statement that a policy which encourages groups of people to keep hold of their collective ethnic identity does not make much sense, and that

Stephen Maly is an Institute Fellow studying the ethnic and cultural "Nations" of Canada.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

federal government subsidies for this purpose make even less sense. He then fired-off a quick comparison with Lebanon, that horrific place where several civil wars have been raging simultaneously for over a decade. Perhaps this fellow has yet to adjust to the relative tameness of Canada's internal disputes, or maybe he believes that civilization is paper thin no matter where you find it--a little tear here and there and pretty soon we are all ruined in a Lebanon of our own design.

It may be niggling to expect more subtlety and caution from people who are positively required to be instant experts. As you know, foreign service officers are necessarily quick studies, as the government moves them from one country to another every two years or so. Moreover, to be fair, I have heard Canadians themselves bemoan the institutionalization of cultural differences, albeit without any references to the bloodstained Middle East. The academics and officials who really think hard on such matters have in mind their own history, which is mostly about negotiation, compromise, and a still-evolving constitutional order, with just a few famous battles and short-lived rebellions to serve as prelude to the self-constrained political crises of the late 20th century. Besides, what Americans save a few learned professors working in the ivy-covered trenches of the university have a stronger grasp of the details of the French and Indian Wars in the 18th century than, say, the Allied strategy behind the 1944 invasion of Normandy? For most of us, sad to say, history doesn't really kick into mental gear until someone mentions the Second World War. For politically conscious Canadians, the crucial event took place back in 1759, on the hummocky plain belonging to a farmer named Abraham.

If only some perspicacious French sentry had spotted the sneaky British marauders scaling the cliffs near Cape Diamond in the dark of night, the history of Canada might have turned out differently. It wasn't long after that fateful battle the next morning, a battle which lasted all of twenty minutes, that the future of Canada was sealed. The Conquest, as it is known here, was of course a triumph for the British and a great tragedy for the French. Britain lost a bright general, Wolfe, while France lost General Montcalm and an empire. Much has happened since to hammer home the meaning of that brief military encounter. For the last two hundred and thirty years, the voices of English-speaking authorities in Canada have been reminding the Francophone minority that they are just that, a minority. Until just recently--the change in attitude occurred in the 1960s, amidst so many other revolutions in political thought worldwide--Anglo-Canadians have also been wont to think and speak of the French as losers.

For the same stretch of time, and with dogged determination, French Canadians have been resisting facts of history and the expectations of their Anglo conquerors in order to first survive and then prosper almost alone in what is usually called a "sea"

of English. Some Quebec nationalists see that although many an historic battle has been lost over the years, the war is nearly won: "national" security is only a few elections or referendums away. Many English Canadians agree with them, and decry the consequences. Whereas Quebec separatists are sometimes gently ridiculed for trying to reverse the course of history by waking up Montcalm in a sort of guerilla raid through time, their more serious detractors now fear that such retroactive measures are hardly necessary, because "French power" is entrenched in Ottawa and enjoying an historic heyday in the province of Quebec.

Now I have just passed over a wealth of details to make a small point about the significance of history in the minds of Canadians. This is to commit the classic error, because without some attention to detail, the story is lacking in essential dramatic elements, including irony, betrayal, and several intertwining, almost byzantine, plots wrapped around a cast of compelling characters whose ghosts seem to reappear fairly regularly, with new names and faces, but with the same historic purposes in mind. Without a feeling for the drama, one can quite easily disregard the past and quickly reach a slick conclusion about present-day Canada, as did the aforementioned diplomats. Journalists and politicians play the same game, generating dramatic headlines, and milking them for all their ephemeral worth. I can hardly do any better, without stretching my own competency beyond credible limits. With a little scholastic help, however, I can highlight a few themes in the epic story of how New France came to be British North America, but not completely.

In the introduction to his splendid 1989 monograph entitled *French Canadian Civilization*, Professor Louis Balthazar adopts the understanding of "culture" as "a way of life or as the prism through which members of a society see the world." He then declares his own conviction that as such the French-speaking population of Canada "must be seen as a distinct people, with a culture...distinguished from that of anglophone Canadians," and that "one of the main features that make French Canadians different is their perception of historical events." This may sound terribly elementary, but I assure you that many Canadians refuse to acknowledge that the prefix "French" does in fact denote a relevant cultural distinction. They argue, for example, that Quebec may indeed be a francophone province, but it is just another province, not the ancestral homeland of one of Canada's founding peoples, and not deserving of any special status.

Notwithstanding any specifically political merit inherent in this point of view (a topic I will return to next month), it is nevertheless a clear-cut case of psychological denial. Some of the English Canadians who reject "The French Fact in North America" (a commonly used phrase in the literature) appear not to realize that what underlies their thinking and behavior is an assumption that sooner or later Quebeckers are going to be assimilated. The sooner the better, they reckon, for everyone,

including the French. This is basic Anglo-Saxon majoritarian logic, fortified by the ideas of John Locke and ratified by scores of legal documents conceived and written in English from 1760 to the present day. That these same people gush with compassion and unabashed guilt about how Canada has treated its Indians, an unassimilated minority if there ever was one, is another story, but the irony is worth noting here.

There are plenty of momentous events in Canadian history to support the plain fact that English is and will remain the dominant culture. The rather sudden arrival on the scene of thousands of pro-British American refugees from the Revolutionary War, for example, who bore no sympathy whatsoever for the French (just a melange of scheming papists, in their view), effectively reversed for nearly a century the cultural generosity embodied in the Quebec Act of 1774, a clever piece of British statesmanship that assured French Canadian loyalty to the Crown by granting protections to their Catholic traditions and French legal system. "For the first time," writes Balthazar, "a non-English and non-Protestant population was allowed, within the British Empire, the right to be itself." In this paradoxical fashion the British were able to keep Quebec out of American hands. Benjamin Franklin, it should be remembered, was just one of a number of yankee patriots who tried to persuade French Canadians to join the fight against King George and reinstate (ahem) "the rights of Englishmen."

The descendants of those expatriates we've come to know as "Tories" (United Empire Loyalists is more accurate, and more politically correct in Canada) have been largely running the English three-quarters of the show in Canada since the beginning of the 19th century. With a few notable exceptions of enlightened understanding, or cultural betrayal--it depends on your point of view--the Loyalists are still waiting impatiently for the French to learn English and drop their pretensions of everlasting Gallic glory.

Despite all this and more on the theme of majoritarian attitudes among the English, there is scarcely any historical evidence to undergird the contention that French Canadians will at some point be ready or willing to quit the stage or speak their lines in the dominant tongue. There was a lamentable period in the late 1940s and 1950s, when the benevolent and sometimes brutal elected dictatorship of Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis brought a kind of unconscious capitulation upon Quebecers who were still held in thrall by conservative elements in the Catholic Church and who felt fortunate to just have a job, remembering all too well the economic deprivations of the Great Depression. It did not matter if Anglos or Americans owned the company, and there was no means of escaping the fact that English was a requirement for any sort of advancement. Francophones kept their mouths shut for a long time, until union leaders and progressive intellectuals like a young Pierre Trudeau began to rouse the rabble.

Nearly all of the Anglo-inspired intimidation and Duplessis-style repression was swept away in what is known as the Quiet Revolution during the 1960s; Quebec has been on a secular and culturally self-confident path ever since. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way language has become the new church of French culture. What the Catholic hierarchy used to regard as Quebec's best insulation from revolutionary ideas and all manner of sinful modernization has now attained almost the force of religion itself. French was the guardian of the faith for as long as the Church held sway. Now Quebecers put their faith in language as the only cultural safeguard they have left.

The Charter of the French Language, otherwise known as Bill 101, is a package of landmark legislation first passed in 1977 to ensure that French would be upheld in commercial life and in the Quebec school system. The Charter established French as the official language of the province, and proclaims that every person has a right to receive services in French from all public organizations and from private enterprises doing business in Quebec. Bill 101 also forbids the admission to anglophone primary and secondary schools of children without at least one parent who had been previously registered in an English school in the province. Further protections have been added in the last few years, including a highly controversial law (Bill 178) banning the use of English on all outdoor commercial signs, a measure that was judged unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1988 and has since provoked dozens of anglophone proprietors to undertake little acts of civil disobedience, like leaving the word "hamburger" untouched on the sign above their roadside "casse croute" (fast food) restaurants.

What the French see as merely another aspect of commercial regulation, part and parcel of a policy to keep their culture intact, the English minority views as the blatant suppression of a basic human right. Marc Levine, writing in the journal *Quebec Studies* (Spring, 1989), characterizes the signage issue as follows:

Many Francophones see anything short of unilingual French signs as the continuing legacy of the "Conquest," while Anglophones view bilingual signs as a symbol that Quebec is a "social contract" between two linguistic communities. In short, the debate over Quebec's "French face" revolves around antithetical visions of the province: Quebec as a fundamentally French society versus Quebec as a dualistic society. In culturally divided societies, such polarized and symbolic issues are rarely amenable to compromise.

Despite the howling of the English minority in Quebec (about 700,000 persons, or 10 percent of the population, mostly concentrated in the Montreal area), and the severe criticisms of

Canadians in other provinces, the "francization" measures are supported by the majority of Quebecers because they regard them as necessary. "To survive and develop in North America,"--this is Balthazar again--"French-speaking persons must live in communities in which they can easily use their language, establish a network of communication in their language, and enjoy francophone institutions (in education, health and welfare, business, sports, etc.)" This emphasis on survival has a long pedigree in the history of Quebec. When juxtaposed to the issue of minority rights, Canada's central political problem takes on the aspect of an ancient philosophical dispute, one which has not been settled anywhere, not even through war and tyranny.

Canadians in the 1980s find themselves on the cutting edge of an historic debate about the rights of individuals in relation to the rights of collective entities. The argument has deep roots in the respective traditions of the English-speaking and French-speaking communities: for every Lockean principle or postulate from Edmund Burke supporting private liberty there is an offsetting aphorism from Rousseau about the common good. The situation is no less clear in international law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1946) strongly supports the paramountcy of individual freedom, but the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (1966) lends itself to collective rights, including the rather significant right of self-determination. Canada's own Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) takes a hybrid form, and it is too early to tell how the internal contradictions will be resolved. Besides, the Quebec government has not ratified said Charter, and nevertheless took advantage of one of its clauses to legally override the Supreme Court on Bill 178.

Are you with me? It's a dense intrigue, to be sure; my only consolation is that most Canadians I talk to about minority rights are as confused as I am. And it is not just an academic wrangle. Provincial human rights codes assume one culture; everyone has a right to a place in it, regardless of their background. "What this means," say two prominent observers in a 1970 book called *The English Fact in Quebec*, "is that if a French-speaking person is prepared to set aside his language and his culture, he will have the right to equal treatment in the system. Human rights commissions would pursue companies who refused to hire French speaking people, for example, but they would not demand that such firms alter language-of-work policies to suit these people." This is the historic backdrop to Quebec's language laws, which are an attempt to wrest and then safeguard a tiny francophone minority (about 2 percent of North Americans) from economic control and cultural takeover by a huge majority. The process unfortunately seems to require limiting the rights of a vocal minority within the province, and thus automatically the rights of individuals.

The reigning premier of Quebec, Robert Bourassa, may have gone too far in prohibiting English on outdoor signs. The

implementing regulations and enforcement measures have been confused and inconsistent so far (there are even unsubstantiated rumors of language police roaming the schoolyards), and polls indicate that most Quebecers are tired of the issue. Had he not defied the courts and fashioned an unsatisfactory compromise between the firmly moderate supporters of francization and the language zealots, however, there would probably been riots in the streets of Montreal, where the battle must be won if Quebec is to remain French. Over 60,000 francophones marched in protest last March, demanding that the provision in Bill 178 allowing English on signs inside commercial establishments be abolished. To NOT stand firmly in favor of the sign law would have awarded a propaganda bonanza to the separatists. Have I mentioned the word "machiavellian" in any allusion thus far; if not, this is the place for it.

As you might imagine, Premier Bourassa is not a very popular guy outside of Quebec, and his English-speaking constituents in the province view the signage measures as a betrayal. Bourassa's Quebec Liberal party, you see, has historically been the political refuge of English Quebecers. The Liberals had promised not to cave in to extremists, and then delivered the restrictive sign bill. Anglophone anger manifested itself last month in the shape of two new political parties, Unity and Equality (rural and urban-based, respectively) that demand a restoration of English rights. The Equality Party elected four members of the National Assembly (Quebec's provincial legislature) in the September 25 election, but what waves they can make in a sea of francophone lawmakers, 92 Liberals and 29 members of the separatist Parti Quebecois, remains to be seen. Two of the Equality upstarts cannot speak or understand French, the language in which all of the Assembly's business is conducted. They represent a wide spectrum of opinion within the English community, including an undetermined number of nasty, spiteful francophobes. I have never heard it stated in such terms, but for every separatist trying to play tricks with time in alerting Montcalm, there is probably a well-to-do anglophone executive living in the west end of Montreal that would like to be able to exhume the spirit of Duplessis, so as to put the French back in their place.

But even that dark miracle would be pointless, because Duplessis "Le Chef" (as in Il Duce; der Fuehrer, el Jefe), in spite of his opportunism and occasional ruthlessness, was at heart a Quebec nationalist; he encouraged French Canadian families to have lots of children, and they did. It was a quiet, behind-the-scenes recapitulation of a post-Conquest strategy of resistance called "revanche de berceau" (revenge of the cradle.) Facing, as they are today, a major demographic crisis, Quebec's francophone leaders might suppress their ideological animosity toward a reborn Duplessis just to get the numbers up. One legacy of the Quiet Revolution is that fewer women are having babies. In fact, Quebec fertility rates are the lowest in Canada and rank near the bottom of all Western industrialized countries. Empty cradles in Quebec translate into reduced representation in the

federal House of Commons and a weakening position vis a vis the immigrant population, which despite francization policies is choosing to learn and use English. Oh, the subplots do abound in this unfolding drama, and it is another ironic twist that the complaints about French domination of federal policy through over-representation in the civil service and separatist blackmail are getting louder just as Quebec's proportional weight in confederation is starting to wane.

No one can say what might have happened in North America had the French been warned that the British were coming up the cliff below the fortress at Quebec. Perhaps Detroit would still be pronounced "Daytwa"; perhaps New Orleans would have become the Marseilles of the Caribbean; perhaps a lot more people would now be enjoying the intellectual fruits of having suffered through a Jesuit education. More realistically, perhaps, Quebec would be an independent francophone country making difficult but necessary adjustments to meet competitive challenges in an English-speaking world market instead of an economically successful province constantly forcing the rest of Canada to adjust to the eventuality of Quebec sovereignty.

The important thing to get ahold of in the present tense is that many English and French Canadians interpret the same history in fundamentally different ways. Each side can focus rather more attention on some events and rather less on others in order to bolster or exaggerate their cause, but this isn't really necessary. When all is said and done, the lack of consensus boils down to two simple but emphatic statements: "We won!"--that's the die-hard English voice; and, "We're still here!"--which is my bastardized version of the "Je me souviens" (I remember) slogan imprinted on every Quebec license plate. Without a renewed sense of common citizenship, a relaxation of linguistic-based cultural tensions, and the giving up of majoritarian attitudes, Canada may soon be history.

I keep saying, I know, in various ways, that Canada is coming apart. The first time, several months ago, I thought I was really going out on a limb, really reaching, foreign service style, for the bold and provocative conclusion. Now, I find myself merely parroting the often repeated phrases of journalists, commentators, people on the street, and members of Parliament; even the Prime Minister himself has suggested in public that if certain political and cultural compromises are not soon forthcoming, Canada is finished. On that particular score, we shall see what happens next month, when Brian Mulroney gets together with all the provincial premiers here in Ottawa to try to repair a badly damaged proposal for a constitutional amendment. Meanwhile, everybody's talking about the breakup of Canada "as we know it" Everyone, that is, except for the older, perhaps wiser, scholars, who have heard it all before. These are the Canadians who really know their history.

Cheers, *Stephen Malz*

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