

Haven't You Noticed the Birth of a New Quebec?

Malcolm Reid

Has nobody realized?

Nobody can see what is there to be seen?

Nobody quite understands? Is that it? Seeing, but not grasping?

No: I'll make those "nobodys" more specific. I'll address my questions to groups of people.

Dear Quebecois friends, don't you realize that everything has changed in Quebec since Bill 101 came into force, or nearly everything? That our tools are better, our arms are stronger now?

And dear ex-compatriots of mine in English Canada... dear friends of my childhood and youth in Ontario... dear enemies; but especially dear friends, with your striving to be sympathizers with Quebec...

Don't you realize that Bill 101 is more than a manifesto, an opinion which one shares or opposes?

That it is a piece of social legislation? That it has been in place for some time now, and that it has had effects? That it has changed the way life is lived?

When the Supreme Court brought down its (I'd say) basically ignorant judgement, I said to myself in a murmur: "And these people are supposed to be educated, cultivated, sociologically alert, subtle!" But I was only saying it, I didn't really feel it strongly. I never have placed great faith in this institution to guide the way to anything. We do not have, in Canadian law, the tradition of the resonant decision, I think. We don't have a Supreme Court — the brave abortion decision of a year ago is perhaps an exception — that announces liberation or breaking of new ground. Our Supreme Court tends, rather, to follow the consensus, the drift of society. Our top jurists do not announce change, they accept it: or, as in this case, they don't.

Simply to indicate how I feel the court might have ruled: it could have said that the right of merchants to speak and sell in the English language is very important, but that the law was within the bounds of reasonable restriction for the public good. I believe a Supreme Court which had some sense of the Quebec-Canada battles and compromises of recent years would have said that; a Supreme Court with a smattering of sociology. A Supreme court which understood what retreats and defeats were the bearable retreats and defeats of a pragmatic French Quebec, and which retreats and defeats were angering, provocative, felt to tread on the minimum that more or less all francophones feel fair, and won.

(The matter of language on signs seems to me not of huge importance. I can see how some were irked by it, but I can't see how anyone was really hurt by the French-only rule. Surely one can always look in the window under the word *chaussure* and see a shoe. But taking yet another chip out of the Charter of the French Language was important. A bit of intuition would have sufficed to know this.)

That Alliance Quebec "crowded triumph over this judgement... nothing surprising there, either, it seems to me. This group represents the old vision of English Quebec. The old guard. The youth of many of its spokesmen doesn't waft away this air of oldness.

I was sad when fire was set in Alliance Quebec's offices. I was shocked. I lived through October 1970, and I think I can tell how you feel when such a thing happens to you.

I don't like violence. But also, the traditionalism of the group does not put me in the same rage that the arrogance of Saint James Street did in 1965. The voice, now, seems to me to be different, to have a plaintive tone to it.

But two groups did disappoint me. Really quite badly. The woodenness of their language disappointed me, the repeating of oft-stated attitudes, as if nothing had changed since '69. The slowness of change now seems to me terrible, I fear this slow, slow, slowness... I fear that things will get venomous and go backwards.

I fear, but I still have a sort of broad confidence that *le Québec français*, that hope of my youth, that essential of my discovery of Quebec, will be built; is being built. That this society *can* be "distinct."

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Here are the two groups that disappoint me:

Quebec nationalists, especially those of my own wave, who are now in their forties.

And people of the left in English Canada, who did seem to have grasped a few of the main points of Quebec nationalism of the Pierre Vallières wave, the Gerald Godin style, the Gilles Vigneault era... Who had seen its *liberation* sense.

So I shall try to say the six or seven things I don't hear you saying, dear Quebecois friends; dear English-Canadian expatriots.

What is there new, that renders the old way of seeing things old?

Bill 101 was the fruit of a situation in which English dominated in Quebec, and showed its domination most clearly in the attraction it held for immigrants, who chose English almost to a man. Almost to a woman. And who did so even when they spoke, say, Italian, with its closeness to French. They felt English as stronger and more practical, and through them a minority that didn't have a very strong birth-rate grew and grew nevertheless, and behaved very much as if the French language simply wasn't there. And the francophones, the great majority of the society in spite of this, suffered, for in it they saw their poverty.

Bill 101 was born, too, from an independence movement which dreamed, in almost its entirety, of an *entirely* French Quebec.

When we put it in this way, I think, we have to see a remarkable moderation in Bill 101. For the law never aimed at eliminating all official recognition for English; though severe, it was legislation of compromise and prudence, with easing the pain of changing Quebec as one of its concerns. Specially, it left an English school system very much in existence.

What it did seek to do, rather, was to turn things around for the French language. To give French a boost. To make it, anyway, a coveted thing, a desired possession, a necessity, if one wished to live in Quebec. If one wished to *grow* in Quebec.

English still alive here; Italian still alive there — fine. But let French become the cement, the interchange, so that everyone at least added it as a skill. Let the pressure to learn shift from the shoulders of the francophones to the non-francophones.

But that francophones still learn English and other languages? Why not, once it was no longer a thing imposed?

"To make Montreal a French Toronto," I remember writing in a profile of Camille Laurin I did in *Saturday Night* around that time. "A French Rio."

And does nobody quite understand?

That goal is in the process of being realized. Step by step. In ten years this very ambitious piece of social legislation has had major effects.

Could health insurance, pollution and conservation laws, or work safety, be said to have changed the spirit of people as much in that time?

The success of the language law comes from its firmness, its element of constraint. The constraint was needed, and it is still needed. For certainly a while yet, say till the new century comes in. It is the way the francophones recall to themselves, and to all, that they are the majority: "We wanted this change, and we organized to demand it, democratically."

But the success of the language law does not come solely from the constraint.

I can see five or six other factors, all important.

The Centres d'Orientation et de Formation des Immigrants (COFI) have been set up, and intelligently set up. They have become much more than French schools for the new arrivals. They are community centres, places of fun and struggles, new-age parish halls, grassroots *maisons de la culture*.

The close relationship of several of the major immigrant languages to French — Portuguese and Italian and even English — so long annulled by economics, has at last begun to be a help.

Immigration patterns have changed, in ways that help French.

Frenchmen and Frenchwomen have begun to emigrate, now, for the first time since 1759. Among the West Indians, the *French* West Indians, Haitians and Martiniquais and Guadeloupians, are suddenly prominent. Algerians come, and Tunisians and Morrocans; they do not even need the COFI.

And most of all, Spanish-Americans come.

Spanish is a very close language to French. More: one of the big and dynamic groups is the Chileans, and these people are the intellectuals of their nation, the kind of people who *never* emigrate unless the Pinochets of this world drive them out. They like French and they like French-style social struggles. Quebec's interest in Spanish has shot up, and learning a second language, suddenly, no longer necessarily means learning English.

A bizarre factor. The great response of the anti-independence people was Canadian bilingualism. This has increased interest in French everywhere, and French is, I would say, now a skill that every ambitious young English Canadian wishes to possess. It has filled — or at least sprinkled

Illustration by
Malcolm Reid



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— Ottawa with Quebecois senior civil servants, and with bilingual young English Canadians. It has given the language a respect and prestige it never had in Ottawa, and Ottawa has been largely French-speaking since the beginning of its existence. This is my native city I am talking about; I know whereof I speak.

These facts also make the French aces in the schools of the West Island of Montreal, yes, even there, the "future" group. The well-adapted, the going-somewhere. And steadily, too, they deprive Alliance Quebec of something it needs if it is to reassemble the old Anglo-Quebec worldview: a mass of people who are thrown into distress when they hear a French sentence spoken to them, and who would be lost and vulnerable if the face of their city became French.

When Bill 101 was being conceived, what was really being conceived was a French Quebec of many ethnic groups. Few partisans of independence and unilingualism really saw this. Few really understood this implication of their own action. The old folk-unity of Quebec is going, a new diverse francophone society is coming.

I know it's hard to face an unexpected shift, an emergence that one hasn't yearned for. What a bizarre injustice that I, as an English-Canadian in my origins, one taught to sympathize with immigrants that should be prepared for something that takes by surprise the prophetic, the Vallières, the Vigneaults.

Toronto, Ottawa, Saskatoon, with their rapid diversification, their thousands of Canadianized faces of brown and yellow, their brake on racism, their stretch of integration (the exception: Saskatchewan racism against the Indians)... I know it's strange that these cities should suddenly be examples for Quebec to study. But the important thing is that Quebec is also performing well in this area; its traditions seem spontaneously to know how to adapt to this new challenge.

One thing has surprised me in this evolution. Here I have a point to concede. An unease within me.

It is that English has remained strong in Quebec, despite the rise of French. I now see that, even were Quebec independent, English would be much spoken in Montreal.

So let us accept that, I say. This is a language with a lot of attraction for all of us that we're talking about. It's the Latin of the century. Well, there will be other centuries. It is still doable; to give priority to French, and broad and deep acceptance. But let's look at some difficulties.

I live in Quebec City, where the new Quebec is clearly visible in the downtown streets. Berber restaurants, South American intellectuals... A trip to Montreal sobers one up, however. Is it the Latin of the century I'm hearing... or the old English arrogance? In every subway train, in every restaurant, the question is with me.

I believe that French resolution and French pedagogy will eliminate this ambiguity with time. For French too has a big

share of the prestige of the century. The International Jack Kerouac Gathering proved this for me, the Quebec Summer Festival goes on proving it. Blais proves it, Sartre proves it, Senghor proves it. I think, for example, about the Portuguese of Montreal, I'm curious about them. What have they lived these ten years? French must have had its impact, and the *criancas* must be different from the old folks. (Allow this one Lusophile interjection: in Portuguese they call a child "a creation.") I know they have a huge immigrant base in France, I know Lisbon is full of rich people and poor who speak pretty fair French.

But they're the quietest ethnic group in America! How are they getting along?

Dear Quebecois friends, let's find out. Our networks are more in place than we think, perhaps. Our tools, our arms, are better now. And have to get better still; staff to be trained, funds to be allotted...

For yes: we do yield very often, in our daily lives, to things English. I myself sometimes use anglicisms for effect; I never did that before. But now that French friends do it...

The defeat of sovereignty-association in 1980 has caused more disorientation than I'd have thought. Me, in Rene Levesque's shoes, I'd have said on Referendum Night: "Here is my resignation. I've decided to go back to the grassroots to implant this fine and workable idea more firmly." But that wasn't the path taken, and now an Quebec might be *why bother?* Pop music, for example, is a sort of Battle of Batoche of culture, and pop means a lot to young people. The Metis need some help against the redcoats, kids.

There are hopeful signs, too. There is a north-south alliance operating in Chilean and Nicaraguan Spanish and Quebecois French, very lively. There is an Italo-Quebecois literary milieu, *Vice Versa* its magazine, *Guernica* its publishing house, very lively also. These things surround me with comforting presences; others have accents too. And so: I owe something to the Charter of the French Language.

My intuition whispers to me that it is the rebuilding of the Quebec left, of the communal feelings we had in 1970, that will rebuild the muscle-tone of French. By giving the language *new things to say*. This left won't be like Vallières' left, I think, it will be strangely punk, very Third World, deeply ecological.

Quebec is part of the First World, that's now clear, and it's questioned by the Third. Problems that are discussed in my city when developers propose demolishing the Cote d'Abraham and citizens propose a "popular" development of the same hill, are the same problems that Amsterdam debates, the same ones Tokyo ponders.

Vocabulary, dear friends! We need new vocabulary. The word *chaussure* no longer frightens, no longer thrills. We need 21 new worlds for 21 new concepts before the 21st century. At least.

You want my opinion? *Tout à changé.*

Malcolm Reid's column is a regular feature in *Border/Lines*.

Still Dreaming of a Multicultural Canada

Chris Creighton-Kelly

As the spectre of our virulent (maybe soon violent?) racism looms over Vancouver, this "Asian" metropolis sitting, as it were, on the coast of the Pacific Rim, it might be prudent to poke about in the Liberal closets and dust off the skeleton marked "Multiculturalism." Are there any vital signs of life here? Is this a body politic worth exhuming? The skeleton replies, "I am alive and well and Canada has a new Multiculturalism Act as of July 1988... C'est quoi le probleme?"

It's a kinda' I-like-the-way-you-move spring day on Commercial Drive. Two women walk arm in arm, a bounce underfoot. They are laughing intimately. It seems to have something to do with desire. Two youngish Vietnamese guys in an old rusty green Datsun honk and smile at this open display of pleasure. The driver turns up the radio, the other yells. The car slows to a crawl, the yell approaches a conversational feel. The shorter woman banters back while her partner silently gives them the finger. Fear and power seem minimal here; but then, it's 2:30 in the afternoon. More laughter all around... and who is joking whom? The car screeches away. The women turn into a cappuccino bar. Seven blocks up the Drive a huge 18-storey commercial development looms, its long shadow casting doubt on the future of this multicultural neighbourhood. There is no laughter; this is not a joke.

So what is multiculturalism? The Act itself states that it reflects the cultural and Canadian society and freedom of all members of the Society to preserve, enrich their cultural heritage and to prevent government homilies about multiculturalism from ringing hollow against the cutbacks to English-as-a-second-language courses, more restrictions on immigration and elimination of multiculturalism to fight racism.

We as citizens need to imagine a Canada (multicultural) a genuine "mosaic"... which is greater than the sum of its "ethnic" (ethnic in reality). Such a dream calls for a reality, however, with the power relations and cultural minorities and collective relation to the state like the Canada Communications Commission.

