

THE FUTURE OF FRENCH IN NORTH AMERICA

The following passages are from an address by the Secretary of State, Mr. Gérard Pelletier at a meeting on September 25 of the French section of the Ottawa Branch of the Canadian Industrial Editors' Association:

...We represent a group of six million French-speaking persons in the midst of a linguistic sea of 220 million whose mother tongue is English. For two centuries, simply to preserve our language, we have had to expend precious energy that other nations devote to the development of their culture. And this is not only a collective struggle; it is a struggle each of us must wage for himself. The nightmare of "Anglicism", the obsession with the incorrect word, poverty of vocabulary, are the daily concerns of everyone who speaks French in North America.

Mention must also be made of the economic corollaries of our linguistic conditions which become confused with our position as a cultural minority. But why recite the litany of problems we know by heart? I am addressing an audience which, I am sure, has often had cause to reflect on these matters, to whom my personal observations would contribute nothing new.

LANGUAGE-CULTURE TIE

However, there is one observation I should like to make. When we ask ourselves why, as French-Canadians, we have persevered with such stubbornness in our fidelity to our language, the answers are many and varied. We cite the instinct of preservation, group solidarity, honesty towards oneself and a thousand other reasons.

But the ultimate reason, in my opinion, lies in the very nature of French, in the fact that the language is inseparable from the culture which inspires it and which it expresses so aptly.

Now the case of English is quite different. One may be genuinely, unrelentingly, Irish and yet speak English. One may be Scottish, Indian or Sinhalese and not know any other language than that of Oscar Wilde and Winston Churchill. English, Scottish and Irish civilization and culture are much more closely related to institutions, history and temperament than they are to the use of a language.

But who can call himself French if he no longer speaks the language of Pascal, if he can no longer read Molière or the *Canard enchaîné* or the memoirs of Malraux and General de Gaulle? I shall not attempt to explain this phenomenon; I shall merely state that it exists; language and culture throughout the French world are so intimately linked together that an individual cannot abandon his language without denying a major part of himself, without becoming a cultural turncoat. And it is mainly for this reason, no doubt, that we have held out here against wind and tide, that we have accepted the unbelievable wager of clinging to this continent, of implanting in this land a language and culture which history would wish to efface.

On the other hand, we must also recognize the

advantages of our situation. If, instead of speaking French, we had inherited Celtic or Romanic as our mother tongue, we would have sunk long ago in the English-language ocean surrounding us. If we have survived, it is because the French language unites us with some 75 million French-speaking persons like ourselves, dispersed throughout the world and found on four of the five continents: Europe, with France as the home of our mother culture, Africa, America and Asia.

In addition, we have inherited not a local *patois* or a residuary idiom but a modern language, capable of expressing modern culture and reality, a vehicle through which we preserve our traditions as we advance boldly towards the future.

True, the French language is often accused of being a step behind the technical progress of our era, of having failed to grasp modern reality. These accusations, already outdated, persist, nevertheless and it is not without some irritation that we hear them repeated. Some even accuse the French mind of being concerned with too many shades of meaning, of being too circumspect, too inclined to engage in interminable and vain discussions on the comparative value of a given expression.

You and I know that these accusations are false, that French is an instrument of extraordinary precision, at once flexible and as hard as a diamond. But we also know that French is not simple, that, in order to write it well, one must understand the meaning of the terms used, weigh each word, and choose, from a range of more or less equivalent terms, the precise word which will enhance the sentence.

To say of French that it is outmoded or aging is a falsehood arising out of ignorance; for while it is true that, from 1918, the French language had done nothing to develop and catch up with modern technology, since 1948, on the contrary, it has rapidly adapted itself to the requirements of the new world born of the war....

In spite of all our apprehensions, French is nevertheless our daily reality. There has been an awakening in French Canada; it remains for the whole of the French-speaking world to meet. France must be more willing to spread her culture; she is of course the principal source of this culture, but for too long a time she has considered it to be her personal property and she must now share it with other French-speaking countries. France must allow other French-speaking countries more active participation in determining the development of the French language. Her academies should perhaps include members from Canada, Lebanon, Morocco...who would make contributions to the common fund of a language which is also theirs.

FRENCH LANGUAGE IN CANADA

And so we come back to a twofold theme which is very familiar to us: the French-speaking world and the state of the French language in Canada.