

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Norman Penner on Canada and Quebec

For the first time since Champlains' defeat on the Plains of Abraham, the Quebecois have a government dedicated to establishing a Quebec independent of Anglophone domination. In November 15 of last year, the Parti Quebecois led by Rene Levesque, swept to power with an absolute majority pledged to hold a referendum to take Quebec out of Confederation.

Norman Penner political science professor at Glendon College, was interviewed this week on the movement towards independence, and the future of Canada.

Penner, a Political Science professor at Glendon College and a widely-read Canadian historian, contributed a lengthy article to the most recent issue of "The Last Post" on the current situation in Quebec.

By PAUL KELLOGG

EXCALIBUR - Is the Parti Quebecois serious about leading Quebec to independence? Is the process towards an independent Quebec now irreversible?

PENNER - I think the PQ is quite serious about independence. I'm not sure that they are all agreed on what they conceive of independence. I think there are important differences in the top echelons of the PQ over what they really mean by independence, going all the way from a complete break to a kind of advocacy of a French - English partnership which would be quite a bit different from the situation of today but would not be as complete a break as is visualized by complete independence.

So I think that part of the reason why they are not sure when they are going to call the referendum is because they are not sure of what they're going to ask and what conception they are going to agree upon. And because of that I think there is an opportunity for English Canada to take some kind of initiative in proposing or advocating some kind of a different relationship, short of a complete break but quite a bit different than the conception we have of Confederation.

EXCALIBUR - In a recent article in Last Post, you called this a convening of the "general body politic of English Canada to discuss, debate and formulate proposals for a genuine French - English partnership". Concretely, how do you see that taking place?

PENNER - It could take a number of forms but what I wanted to say in there if I stressed it forcibly enough is that it is too early to put forward concrete formulae. That is why I call for the broadest possible national consultation, because I don't think that anybody's got the answer. But if we have the approach that we are ready to change the relationship between French and English Canada, that is a sufficient guarantee that at the end of a relatively long period of consultation we might arrive at a consensus in English Canada that could be acceptable to a large body of French opinion.

EXCALIBUR - That brings to mind the whole question of English Canada's role in the decision on independence. Should English Canada have a say in whether or not Quebec becomes an independent nation state? Trudeau has proposed holding a national referendum to coincide with the Quebec referendum.

PENNER - That would be another way of denying the right to self determination. What they're asking is whether Quebec should be independent. French Canada as constituted in Quebec is a nation and therefore ought to have the same rights as any other nation including the right to decide on its future. The national referendum would be a camouflaged form of compulsion exercised against French Canada and if there's anything we've got to avoid it is even the slightest appearance of compulsion.

EXCALIBUR - A recent Star headline quoted Trudeau chastising English Canadians for not being patriotic enough to keep Quebec in Confederation. He's been on

an almost election - style campaign since the election November 15 trying to arouse a feeling of patriotism in English Canada. By his own admission he has been unsuccessful. How do you account for that, that he hasn't been able to make Canadians too concerned about the fact that Quebec is leaving.

PENNER - Well I don't know if it signifies that completely. I think there's a great feeling of distrust towards Trudeau on other grounds. It seems that his whole policy on federalism, on economics, on relations with the United States and on federal - provincial relationships have collapsed. That's one thing and I think that in spite of the fact that you can respect the man, you cannot build up too much enthusiasm around him in view of the sorry record of the government.

There is one thing that I would like to say, and it's only partially connected with Mr. Trudeau. There are certain spokesmen in Canada, particularly The Toronto Star, whose role since November 15 has been really abominable. In the most insidious and vicious way the Star is trying to stir up a war-spirit amongst English Canadians towards French Canada.

For example, yesterday when the national council of the PQ met to discuss the machinery for setting in motion the referendum which is going to be held in a democratic way, what was the heading in the Star? "PQ Meets to Plot Separatism". Now that plus all kinds of articles and insinuations that the PQ is anti-semitic - they even had Johnathan Mathorp saying that is a Nazi, and they had Robert Neilson saying that it was a dangerous and hateful party. Now that kind of thing has got to be resisted, and the Star has got to be exposed for what it is, a hate-monger towards Quebec.

EXCALIBUR - You say the Star's been trying to whip up a war - spirit. Can they be successful in that?

PENNER - I don't think so, I think the Canadian people, once they're involved in the discussion which I think is essential, will rise to the occasion. And in the course of rising to the occasion will be able to define a more positive English Canadian nationalism than we've been able to define up to now. The problem with our nationalism up to now is that it has been centred on either England or the United States, only a minority centred it on Canada. One of the positive results of what happened in Quebec may be a positive English Canadian nationalism which will include in it the concept of friendship and partnership with French Canada.

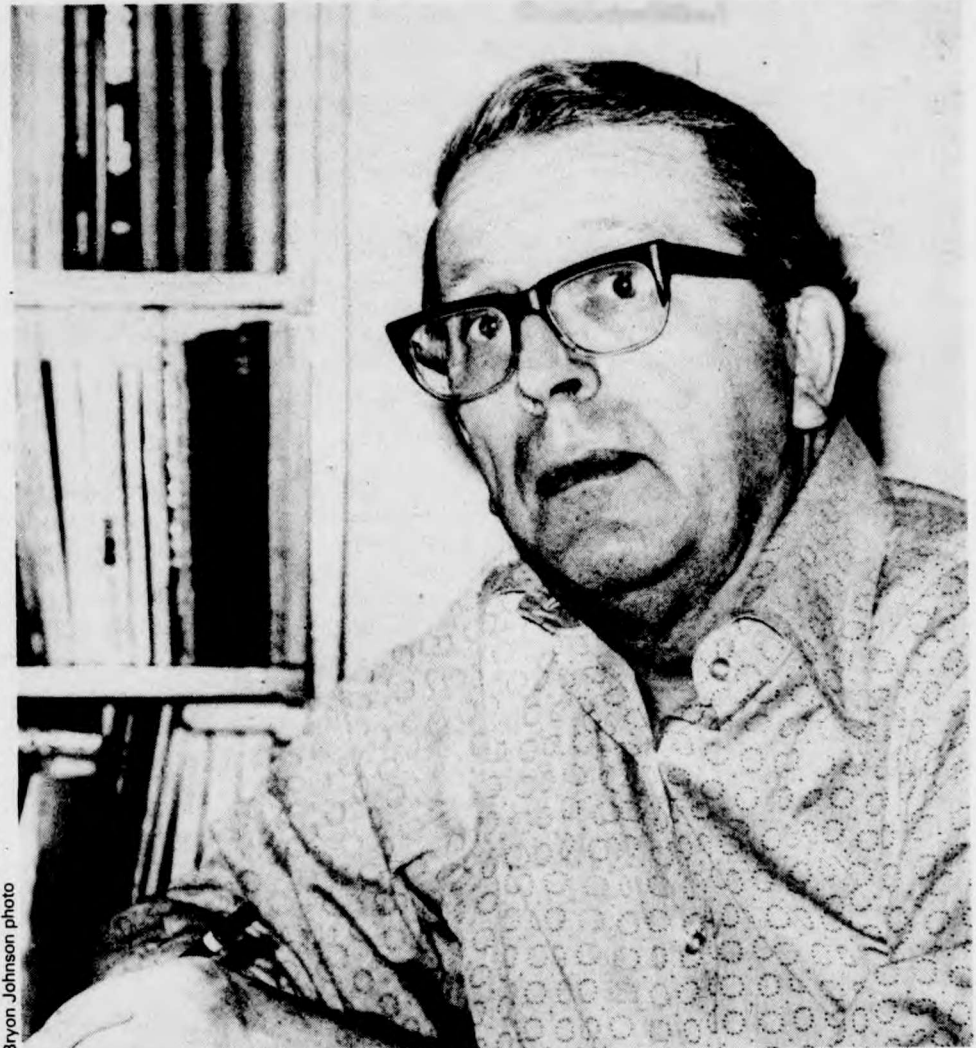
We have got to get rid of the idea that 1867 is good for all time. 1867 had its own problems and it wasn't all that popular at the time. Confederation had a lot of weaknesses, a lot of blemishes, it worked in a half hearted way. It's not working at all now, that's the thing we've got to recognize. It's not the big thing in French Canada that it is in English Canada, and in English Canada its not that big in Nova Scotia, or in Alberta, or in British Columbia but its still pretty big in Ontario.

Incidentally Ontario spokesmen are very concerned, are the most concerned about the possibility of French Canada dropping out because they would stand to lose the most.

EXCALIBUR - Why is that?

PENNER - Well because the biggest market for goods from Ontario is in Quebec, because Quebec is the second industrialized area of Canada. It's part of Central Canada, economically it's one region, Ontario and Quebec. Politically and nationally it's two regions, but economically it's one region.

EXCALIBUR - With Ontario and Quebec being part of one economic region, is political independence sufficient to make Quebec really independent since they're so tied in to the continent economically?



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PENNER - There are limits to the independence of every nation, particularly economic. Canada itself isn't all that independent as you know. In a certain sense what Rene Levesque said in New York is that while you've been making all the deals with the United States, we'll make some on our own. In a certain sense that may be inevitable at the present stage.

It's clear that there's so much wrong with the relationship between Quebec and Ottawa and the rest of Canada, at least as perceived by the Quebecers. If in the process they get themselves entangled or create a new dependence on the United States that will be bad.

EXCALIBUR - What kind of government is the PQ government? I heard one person say that they are more NDP than the NDP considering the type of legislation that has been passed.

PENNER - Well I think they regard themselves as a social democratic party.

As a result of the quiet revolution, social democracy came to Quebec in the form of a separatist party. Except for its separatism, its economic and social programmes are very much like those of the NDP or the British Labour Party or the Swedish Socialist Party. But there are important differences. One, that it's a nationalist party, two that it doesn't have organic links with the labour movements, three that it is overwhelmingly dominated by technocratic, petty-bourgeois intellectuals, more so than any of the other parties we've been talking about.

The Parti Quebecois has shown itself to be a very reformist party. It raised the minimum wage. The minimum wage is now higher than it is in Ontario. Rene Levesque is trying very hard to cement a relationship with the trade union movement. They are apparently going to revise the electoral law in a way that has never been done in Canada, that will make it possible for small parties to be represented in the House. The nationalization programme is about as extensive as any other social democratic government, it's limiting itself according to Rene Levesque's declaration, to the asbestos corporations. But it may choose to undertake other nationalization programmes. But basically it's a party of social reform. It's going to find it difficult to carry out all the social reforms that it wanted because of the massive debt the Bourassa government bequeathed to them. Basically I think that it's on the reform side of the spectrum, that's why people voted for it as an alternative to the Liberal Party rather than voting for the Union Nationale, or the Parti Creditiste.

EXCALIBUR - What's on the agenda as we approach the referendum?

PENNER - At the moment the Parti Quebecois has got the initiative, for the first time in history the French Canadians have the initiative vis a vis English Canada. They're now working out their roles, we've got to start working out ours. Not from the view of fighting with them, but from the point of view of creating a genuine, reconstituted French-English partnership, and we've got to start now.