

WHY NOT A MELTING POT

Stepping into another language is going through the looking-glass with Alice; one sees one's own world of English from the opposite side. In the process one acquires perspectives of one's own culture; a man or woman with full capacities in two languages is in this sense double-powered. Some 4 million Canadians are now, by the 1981 census, bilingual. Most of these bilingual Canadians are French-speaking, but the number of English Canadians who are bilingual is rising, and steeply.

Of Canada's 25 million people, 25% are born French, a number equal to nearly half the population of Australia. (Of the remainder 61% speak English, and other languages such as German, Italian, Polish, Ukrainian and native languages.)

Most of the French Canadians live in one province, Quebec, the largest in area of all the Canadian provinces and the second largest in population. There are, however, French minorities in all the other nine provinces, averaging about 5%; in one province bordering Quebec, New Brunswick, French-speakers comprise 34% of the population.

Canada has devised national institutions to take cognizance of these facts. Canada's Parliament has been bilingual since Confederation, but in 1969 the Official Languages Act put in place an official right of access to federal civil services in Ottawa, and elsewhere, in either of the two official languages. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation operates a French and an English network in both TV and radio. It is possible, for example, to live in Vancouver, British Columbia, some 4000 kms from Quebec, and where the population is only 4% French, and still listen to French TV.

The fact of French Canadians has given most other Canadians awareness of another world, another culture other than their own. Sometimes this is not altogether appreciated. There are some Canadians who, like Americans, can tolerate nothing but English. For these a litre, or a kilogram, or French words on Kellogg's Corn Flake boxes, represent something profoundly sinister, a creeping miasma that threatens slowly to choke English and English Canadian institutions. Most English Canadians dismiss such fears as absurd.

For French Canadians the sense of danger is much more acute. They have felt threatened since 1763 when Canada was handed over by France to Britain by the Treaty of Paris. Their sense of being beleaguered, of being surrounded by a sea of English, is not eased by the presence of the United States. There the principle is of a national melting pot, in which all the immigrant languages are finally melted down into English. These American attitudes contrast with the official Canadian position that Canada is a bilingual country. Its English inhabitants do not need to speak French — most English Canadians do not — but the number who do is growing and in the long run may be of real significance for the future of the country. The recent race for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative party was won by a good candidate, but he was also an English Canadian who was thoroughly bilingual.

Some 200 years of history have taught French Canadians to be on the watch against threats to their language and culture. Some French Canadians have given up the struggle and become English. French Canadians who migrate to the other provinces from Quebec, or who go to the United States, usually lose their mother tongue within a generation. In Canada this process has been much slowed down in the past twenty years, and it is possible that, in the future, French minorities in provinces outside Quebec may start to stabilize and come back. It takes, however, a certain critical mass to bring this about. Generally French Canadians in Quebec look at their brothers in other provinces and feel that strengthening Quebec is the best way to survive.



Montreal Street Musicians.

Photo: H. Ekmekjian.

This core group of French Canadians — the 5½ million in Quebec — are determined to keep, and if possible enlarge, the Frenchness of Quebec. Why this determination? Why bother fighting English? Why not accept the submergence of French as the easiest and most natural way to live and to adjust to North American reality?

The answer is, surprisingly, difficult to explain to English speaking people, whether they be Canadian English, American English, English English, or Australian English. It requires an effort of imagination to understand how much of one's life, one's thought, one's very existence, is bound up with one's native language. In most English-speaking societies, especially those of North America and Australia, the question never really arises. One hardly thinks about it. What is language to one's own culture, to one's individuality? Are we not what we think? Are we not creatures — perhaps even prisoners — of the way we think? Are our minds not, indeed, largely the result of the language we think in? French Canadians don't need to ask themselves such questions. They have long known the answers. They want to defend that individuality, that Frenchness that is themselves, against the corrosion offered by a powerful, vigorous, well-established language like English, steadily growing in the later 20th century as the lingua franca of the world.