

La Palme Reads the Future



Citizens of the United States may not grasp fully the transcendent importance of some Canadian provincial premiers. Provinces are not states — a state governor is almost always a Democrat or a Republican, and as part of a national network, he may aspire to the Senate or even to the presidency.

Few provincial premiers become prime ministers, but they occupy powerful pinnacles of their own. Provinces control education, health, welfare, local commerce and highway construction. They control their own natural resources. The premier may very well lead an independent party of his own. (At the moment four of the ten premiers are neither Liberals nor Conservatives.)

During the 1940s, while Mackenzie King was manoeuvring tirelessly in Ottawa, Maurice Duplessis was ruling absolutely in Quebec. Duplessis's party, l'Union Nationale, was composed of off-shoot Conservatives, but it owed allegiance only to Duplessis. To begin with his positive qualifications, he was a very intelligent and witty man. He was, on the other hand, no lover of democracy, of trade unions nor of civil rights. He supported an intimate connection between church and state and used the "padlock law" to seize any place that he thought was used for "communist" propaganda.

To Robert La Palme, a Quebec cartoonist, Duplessis was a pimp selling the province to US corporations. He was Dorian Gray, a concealed mass of decay. He was the improvident Santa Claus whose pre-election pork barrel spending exhausted the provincial treasury. La Palme has a distinction beyond the distinction of his graphic line — he openly opposed Duplessis and survived. La Palme was the iconoclast of Quebec, and he once, reportedly, was offered \$25,000 to lay off the premier.

When Duplessis died in 1959, his party disintegrated. His opponents, young radicals such as Pierre Elliott Trudeau and René Lévesque (friends of



La Palme), would see the quiet revolution bring freedom from old ideas and old politicians. Montreal would be rebuilt, the theatre would break into dazzling new modes, and a powerful pride would energize the province.

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