A Dialogue of the Deaf

We all realize that at the present time our country is undergoing a period of great tension. Some believe that even the unity of the country has become unacceptable. Others think the very foundations of our federal system should be reviewed. For yet other people, at the other extreme, any change, any evolution towards accommodating Quebec's aspirations appears like a dishonourable concession. This dialogue of the deaf is so prevalent that the voice of moderation, when it speaks, is barely heard.

This confusion of attitudes has deep historical roots. Let us go back, for a moment, to 1867. It is often said that Confederation was not sought for itself; it was a marriage of convenience. In fact, the political unification of Canada - Confederation - effected in 1867 was mainly motivated by political and economic aims.

Politically, in 1867 English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians desired to maintain a Canadian identity distinct from that of the American, to ensure that the Canadian community would survive alongside the United States. Confederation was the means of reaching this goal, and until now it has succeeded in that aim. However, Confederation must, in one form or another, continue to succeed even more in the future for, as Claude Ryan, associate editor of Le Devoir, wrote recently: "I believe that a political society made up of people of different cultures and religious denominations, far from being unviable, can prove to be more favourable than a monolithic society to the development of liberty and the rule of reason."

Economically, in 1867 our country was composed of colonies that believed that economic co-operation could improve their individual and common strength. Confederation was their means of bringing about that improvement, and here again it has succeeded. Today our country is one of the wealthiest in the world, with a standard of living surpassed only by that of the United States and Sweden (though by saying this I don't mean at all that we should be complacent about our economy, about our regional economic difficulties, or about the low standard of living of many Canadians).

Cultural Development Neglected

It seems to me, however, that in one sense our nation is based on a triangle composed of the political, the economic and the cultural; and while the political and the economic were provided for in 1867, no provision was made for the third side of this basic triangle - our common cultural development. By culture, I mean here culture as suggested by the English author Matthew Arnold; that is, the study and pursuit and enjoyment by the general people of all sides of our humanity - our thoughts, our art, our literature, our performing arts, the best which has been thought and said and fashioned in the world... "and, through this knowledge, to turn a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits".

Since 1867, we have left our cultural life almost exclusively to personal initiative and to private organizations. As a result, the body of our national culture has remained relatively anaemic; and, to the extent of