



THE PROVINCES ATLANTIC CANADA

ROBERT PICHETTE
IN MONCTON

Taking tea with Boutros-Ghali

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the former secretary-general of the United Nations, is an impressive person to meet, even in a banal Moncton hotel suite. An Egyptian aristocrat, he has the look of a debonair Parisian boulevardier. The appearance is misleading, as all appearances are, for Mr. Boutros-Ghali is anything but a figurehead. He has a sharp, active mind, things to say and strong views to express. And he does so without being glib, as one might expect from a veteran diplomat of his stature. He's a former professor of international law and international relations, but he doesn't lecture; he explains effortlessly.

Mr. Boutros-Ghali is in Canada on behalf of La Francophonie, the community of 52 countries and governments that have French as a common language. In reality, like the Commonwealth to which it is often wrongly compared, it is a disparate association of states and governments that are either monolingual, bilingual or multilingual.

That requires a lot of explaining, particularly to non-francophones, but Mr. Boutros-Ghali, the first secretary-general of the organization, is undertaking his mission in Canada with obvious zest. In one year, the eighth Francophonie summit will be held here in Moncton, and he's gearing up.

Unfortunately, that message he may have to carry right to the Parti Québécois itself, following the churlish temper tantrum by Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard, who refused to meet him under diplomatic rules set by the federal government. Mr. Bouchard accused Ottawa of "trying to erode the gains made by Quebec within the Francophonie. It is unacceptable." Ottawa, in turn, says a visit by a diplomat of Mr. Boutros-Ghali's stature visit falls in its jurisdiction.

(At the time of my conversation with Mr. Boutros-Ghali, Mr. Bouchard had not yet concocted his miserable protocol problem with Ottawa.)

In both his public speeches and in private conversation, the Francophonie leader articulates views and positions that are refreshingly novel and sensible. They certainly do not fit the usual clichés. For one thing, he says it would be a mistake to consider the Francophonie an entrenched bastion against the threat of English. "On the contrary," we must consider the Francophonie as a defence of cultural diversity, of plurilingualism. The Francophonie is an integral part of the global humanistic culture."

There is passion in the urbane voice when he says the Francophonie favours an open world, chiefly because this encourages a "culture of peace."

Egypt's former deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs recalls that, when he broached the subject of Egypt's participation in the Francophonie with Claude Cheysson, then France's foreign affairs minister, his colleague expressed surprise that an Arabic country would seek membership. For Mr. Boutros-Ghali, however, because of the very diversity of the Francophonie, Egypt's participation was to be an additional rampart against all types of fundamentalism.

He is politely impatient with Cassandras who argue that Francophonie summits are too costly. In answer to a question I did not ask, he mentioned that the cost of a conference — they're held biennially — is less than the price of a tank or of a large military manoeuvre.

For him, a gathering of members of la Francophonie is one way of mobilizing world opinion. Summits do not resolve problems but they are like launching pads. Mr. Boutros-Ghali, a Christian Copt, drew an analogy between summits and an old proverb: "God needs bells to call his faithful." The Summit will ring bells to alert the world to the problems that assail it, in such areas as the environment, human rights and youth.

The theme of next year's summit, chosen by the heads of state and governments at the seventh summit in Hanoi is Youth.

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By all accounts, Mr. Boutros-Ghali's mission of information is off to a good start. With his quiet but effective diplomacy, there is little doubt that, in the process, he will demystify the Francophonie. Paradoxically, the spry, 76-year-old, consummate diplomat is about to rejuvenate what many considered a somewhat xenophobic organization.

And what a pity that, because of a fit of pique, Quebec's Premier will miss an opportunity to be enlightened by a wise man. Ah well, there is always next year. In New Brunswick, where preparations for the 1999 summit are well under way.

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