

# Ottawa political barometer falling

by Richard Desjardins

The political climate of Ottawa is generally a good indicator of the mood of the nation and the recent Parti Quebecois victory on the minds of most Canadians, it is not surprising to find Ottawa now enveloped in a cloud of uncertainty and depression.

While the A.I.B.'s rough-justice rule and the recent charges of patronage between senior government officials and business leaders have damaged the morale of federal civil servants, the current prevailing mood of depression in Ottawa is the result of the major breakdown in the administration and direction of the civil service.

Never known for its frivolity, Ottawa is nonetheless weighted down with a feeling of hopeless despair which has permeated the top-level mandarins right down to the Ottawa bus drivers.

Though a career in the civil service has never pretended to be anything exciting, it has been, in the past, safe and predictable. Many career civil servants eventually rise to positions of responsibility. Until a few years ago, competitions and exams were used to award promotions. A recent news item on CBC reported that six out of every ten important positions in the civil service is now "filled" by patronage.

Current rumors circulating in the Ottawa cocktail circuits tell of high-level civil servants being forced to take intensive language training their last year before retirement in order to obtain full pension benefits. While these civil servants are taking their all expense-paid language lessons, they are also drawing full salary and full benefits. Many who undertake the English or French language program may never have to speak a word in the language after the lessons are completed.

Though compulsory language training programs are a sensitive issue with civil servants, Ottawa's depression can be attributed to the lack of direction in government policy, and in the civil service itself. Whether a new party in office will effect change is doubtful, because it seems the inertia in the civil service has been allowed to continue for too long. Most people agree that fat trimming should be conducted on a large scale, but few civil servants want the "shakedown" to start in their department. The reason? Quite simply, a major portion of government work is paper shuffling. It is not uncommon for stenographers to idle away hours reading current novels. Any term body giving the faintest hint of being "occupied" can survive in the civil service maze.

Though the wages on the lower end of the civil service hierarchy are not astronomical by any stretch of the imagination, jobs are available for anyone with the fortitude to withstand the boredom. Rare is the elevator in any federal building that isn't operated by a smiling young lady. The security staff in the National Arts Building is so large that they have given up any pretense of looking alert or interested. Instead of creating relevant employment, the federal government has expanded jobs at the lower end of the civil service.

And it appears the federal government has become so plagued by patronage that it can only respond to major problems in a patronizing manner. The unemployed are being patronized by being slotted into mindless, low-level, dead-end civil service



The Peace Tower might be misnamed... The House of Commons Peace Tower might shadow the grey depression of disgruntled and dismayed civil servants. Photo Richard Desjardins

jobs. Quebecois are being patronized by such things as the 30 million dollar redevelopment scheme undertaken by Robert Campeau.

The federal government, for some unknown reason, seems to be patronizing Campeau by agreeing to take a thirty-year lease on the property, after which they will purchase the entire complex.

It seems strange the government would agree to a 30-year lease before mandatory purchase — why not a five or ten-year lease? And why lease at all?

In 30 years the Campeau building will cost the government three times as much (or more) as construction costs are now. The government says they need office space in Hull immediately and that's the reason for the massive building projects, yet

they have spent years working on a scheme to relocate government departments to the various regions of the country. The first phase moves Veterans' Affairs to the Maritimes; next in line is the West. This means new building programs for Canada's various regions — and either empty buildings in Ottawa or an artificially-expanded civil service to fill those buildings. Either way hurts.

All this patronage has confused the civic, and provincial governments to such an extent that no one really knows who is putting the icing on the cake anymore, but nobody wants to miss out on their share. As soon as the Parti Quebecois victory was announced, the Liberal MP for Hull stood up in the House of Commons and stated that if Quebec were to separate from

the rest of Canada, Hull would separate from Quebec.

However, even the refurbishing of Hull does not necessarily make for grateful Quebecois. It is still relatively harder for a French-Canadian to break into the top ranks of an essentially English civil service. Regardless of that fact, English-speaking Canadians in the civil service still feel threatened and many believe that there is actually a French conspiracy brewing.

In the past few years the feeling of disillusionment has spread from Ottawa/Hull into Quebec.

Fed up with scraps thrown at Quebec at the whim of federal mandarins, it is not surprising that the working class of Quebec has elected to rid themselves of the air of uncertainty by voting the Parti Quebecois into power

(labor supported Levesque by over 60 per cent). If the pulse of the working class in Quebec is any real barometer of feelings in Quebec in regards to separation, it would seem that a vocal minority has caught the imagination and the ear of the media. The real issue is a clearly stated partnership in Confederation but for the past 109 years, Ottawa leaders have managed to keep Quebec's partnership in limbo it seems. Meanwhile, opportunists are now able to turn a quick buck with buttons for and against separation, as well as "Quebec passports."

The solution to the problems facing Canada today may well be a change in government. While westerners are certain of a Conservative victory in the next federal election, most easterners are more uncertain about Joe Clark's capabilities and sensibilities than they are of Pierre Trudeau's.

Prime Minister Trudeau has been fortunate in that when any real issues develop, he always seems to have a smokescreen come to his rescue. With problems of inflation and unemployment battering away at our economy and an increasingly meaningless, expanding civil service, Trudeau is preoccupying himself with the question of Quebec.

If there is any immediate solution to some of the basic problems in our present system of government and in the present workings of a Liberal government, it would seem to be an inquiry and shakedown of the civil service. However, it appears neither Liberals nor Conservatives are prepared to perform the much-needed autopsy and thus the grey mood dampens citizens of both Ottawa and Hull. It seems civil servants know the politicians dilemma and they are biding their time as best they can until retirement brings release from an often boring, unfulfilling "make-work" job.

*Richard Desjardins, a fourth-year education student, born and raised in the Ottawa-Hull area, returned home this Christmas. His observations are based on his impressions upon returning home, and after interviewing various civil servants.*

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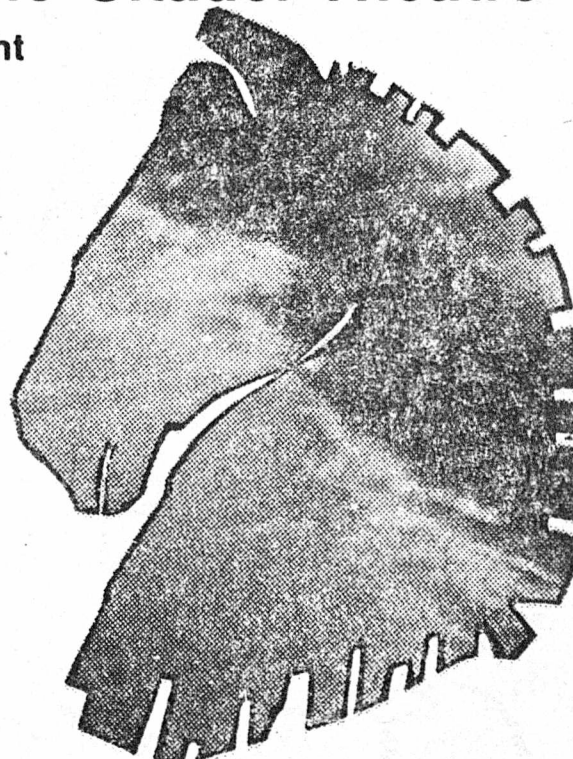
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