

A Loud Voice in Quebec's Revolution

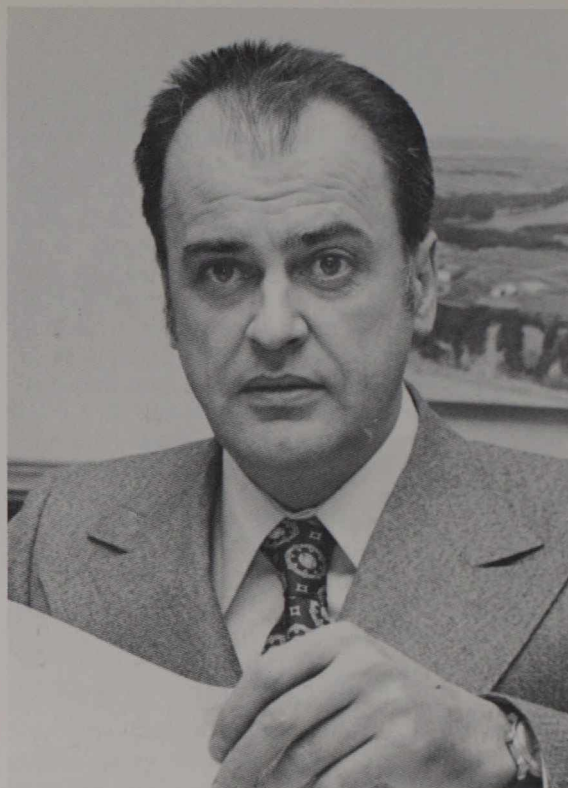
Today Jean-Paul Desbiens is the Provincial of the Frères Maristes, in the town of Desbiens on Lac Saint-Jean in Quebec. (The Provincial is the head of a religious order in an entire province.)

Twenty years ago he was *Frère Untel*, Brother Anonymous, the author of caustic essays attacking the established structure of Quebec education.

Desbiens, then a teaching brother in a *collège classique*, was inspired by a column by André Laurendeau in *Le Devoir*, Montreal's most influential newspaper. Laurendeau criticized the sloppy French spoken by most young people, and gave it the name "joul," a common mispronunciation of *cheval* (horse).

Desbiens wrote Laurendeau a letter, and the columnist ran it over the signature *Frère Untel*.

It was the first of a series of Desbiens' essays that ran in *Le Devoir* and were then collected in a book, *Les Insolences du Frère Untel (The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous)*. The *Impertinences* were soon being compared with the writings of Molière, Heinrich Heine, and even Rabelais. They came at an auspicious moment—the "Quiet Revolution" was underway and *Frère Untel* would play a rollicking role in the process.



Jean-Paul Desbiens

Impertinences

Below is an excerpt from *Frère Untel's* first essay.

The Language of Defeat

Our pupils talk joul, write joul, and don't want to talk or write any other way. . . . Joul is a boneless language. The consonants are all slurred, a little like the speech of Hawaiian dancers, according to the records I have heard. Oula-oula-oula-oula-oula-alao. They say chu pas apable for je ne suis pas capable. [I am not able.] I can't write joul down phonetically. It can't be fixed in writing for it is a decomposition, and only Edgar Poe could fix a decomposition. You know the story where he tells of the hypnotist who succeeded in freezing the decomposition of a corpse—it's a wonderful horror story.

Postscript

Jean-Paul Desbiens is pleased with the changes in Quebec. In a recent interview he told CANADA TODAY/D'AUJOURD'HUI: "For one thing the youngsters speak better French. It has very much improved, partly because of the influence of television, particularly the example of the sports reporters who speak well and to whom the youngsters pay great attention. There is also a new sense of pride in being what they are.

"More fundamentally, higher and more comprehensive education is now available to many more. So great a venture has its miseries, but on the whole it has been positive, interesting and dynamic."

The Odds

A young American is more likely to go to college than a young Canadian. The comparison is not precise, however, since the various modes of post-secondary education in the two countries are not the same.

Still, 23.6 per cent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four are in college of one type or another. Of Canadians in the same age group, 19.6 per cent are in some type of post-secondary education, including 12 per cent in universities.

Student Exchange

In 1979, 3,970 full-time undergraduates and 1,838 part-time undergraduates from the United States were studying in Canada as well as 2,283 full-time and 886 part-time graduate students. In 1979, 5,099 Canadian citizens received student visas from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. (This figure was down substantially from the 9,151 who registered during 1978.)