

Your hang-ups help you hang together, Canada



ROBERT BOURASSA—"English and French-speaking Canadians have to work together to build a strong Quebec within Confederation. All Canada will be poorer if we fail."

... "Ogilvies must be the last store in Montreal that will still hire a unilingual English clerk" ...
 "Hey, Alain, how come the States have blacks and we got French? 'Cause they got first choice, yuk yuk" ...
 "Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver" ...
 "Expo soixante-sept, Expo sixty-sevinn" ...
 "Now I understand the separatists, and I find myself defending them, damn it" ...



RENE LEVESQUE—"As a means to a better society, we need our own self-government. Our separatist party will, by a conservative estimate, win 20% of the popular vote next time."

Story and Photos by ELAINE VERBICKY

Canada 102?

We came together at the University of Winnipeg, about 60 students from seven provinces, to wonder how much longer the country is going to hang together.

Two years after the centennial of Confederation, it was the same question the Fathers of Confederation had gone to bed with at the close of the Quebec Conference. How much time could you give a committee-produced nation, a political state that seemed to cohere only in the depths of John A. MacDonald's free champagne?

Sure we were talking about the Great Canadian Cliche—but there is still so much to say, we discovered. I suspect the day people stop worrying about Canada, the day the cliché dies, the country dies, too.

Rene Lévesque and Guy Joron, the president and finance expert of the separatist Parti Québécois, told us Canada has about six to ten years left; Quebec has emerged from 100 years of lethargy, discovered herself as a nation and begun to demand the tools of national self-determination, they said.

Said Lévesque, punctuating his oratory with the wave of a burning cigarette, "We think Quebec has come of age, and we will never do a good job of things unless we have control of the tools to guide our destiny."

"Canadian federalism has a structural problem you won't solve with band-aids. This B and B thing is like two guys handcuffed together, trying to go opposite ways, and when one jerks the other they each grin and say sweetly 'So sorry'. B and B will not solve one iota of the Quebec problem."

Donald MacDonald, privy council president and Liberal party leader in the House of Commons, tried to maintain the issue of linguistic rights is "the most important challenge to Canadian unity at this time."

The most reasonable course of action for the French speaking population of Canada is "to seek the support of other Canadians in the protection of the French language and to improve the opportunities to live in that language, both inside and outside Quebec," he said.

Guy Joron could only shake his head vigorously. "We don't really care about bi-lingualism across Canada. Everybody is missing the point. It is a question of powers for Quebec."

"We cannot accept that part of the responsibility of the state be under the control of another nation" (Ottawa, representing English Canada).

Rene Lévesque's description of his childhood and education in "colonialized" Quebec was the story of the making of a separatist. Lévesque is a reasonable man, frighteningly logical. His case for an independent Quebec, taken on its own terms, seemed irrefutable.

He told us over 85% of the industry in Quebec is English, American or foreign owned. The men at the top in business, industry and the federal civil service are English, or were so almost exclusively until a few years ago. Immigrants are demanding that their children be educated in English instead of French.

This is all happening in a province with a population 80% French.

Twenty years ago, the Quebec French nationalism was defensive, a fortress idea with its prime purpose the defense of the French culture in the ocean of English America.

Today, Quebec is in the throes of la révolution tranquille, a profound sociological, political and spiritual transformation.

More and more French Quebecois are looking on Quebec, not Ottawa, as the national state of the French Canadian nation. Ottawa, the face of the nine English provinces, is a foreign government, and its programs do not serve the needs of Quebec.

This line of thinking has evidenced itself in the political phenomenon, as Lévesque described it, of all Quebec provincial parties having to adopt positions "in favor of some kind of special status for Quebec."

"They all ask for all of social welfare, all of manpower, all of immigration under our provincial control."

"Any government in Quebec that doesn't work for that will get vomited."

Lévesque believes that today, just as much as in Lord Durham's time, there are "two nations warring in the bosom of a single state." They are tearing each other apart; the only sane thing to do is to separate them.

"And if separation is managed right, it will be more profitable money-wise than our federal-provincial set up—even in the short term, even in two or three years," he asserted.

Robert Bourassa, the financial critic for the Quebec liberal party, took Lévesque to task on his economics. "If we have an independent Quebec, it might mean long austerity. If we overtaxed to support the nation of Quebec, our capital would leave," he said.

He argued the aspirations of Quebec could be met within a revised Canadian federalism.

"Federalism is the most elastic kind of political system. There is no need for simple answers. Quebec is in some respects a province not like the others, and requires special conditions in special circumstances."

This problem turned into the main concern of the conference. Is Canadian federalism fluid enough to accommodate itself to a rapidly changing society, to strong demands for greater provincial powers and equality of opportunity for the French nation?

Arnold Edinborough, publisher of Saturday Night magazine, gave our assembly an idealist's yes.

"There has always been regionalism," he said. "Many of our prime ministers exhausted themselves trying to bring about unity. Building tools of unity nearly killed them."

"Even C. D. Howe, tough as he was, couldn't survive building a pipeline bringing—of all things!—natural gas to Ottawa."

"We not only have regionalisms based on language, religion, geography, but a regionalism based on money. Go out to the West or the Maritimes. They'll tell you about Ontario."

"There is no such thing as a Canadian unity. Maybe there is a Canadian nation; I'm not convinced of that. Maybe we haven't got one nation, let alone two."

But urbanization, mass communications, and mobility of the elites are changing Canada, bringing about decentralization on the personal level. And with a new society, said Edinborough, "I think we are going to get a new kind of Canadian nationalism."

Everyone talked Canada over good whiskey or cheap wine into all hours of the night. Sometimes we talked in French, sometimes in English, more often than not in a mixture.

I remember seven of us in a hotel room full of 3 a.m. smoke and dirty glasses. Dave from Ontario looked at Bruno the Franco-Manitoban.

"Hey, Bruno, why can't you just be Canadian?" he asked. "Because I am not Canadian," Bruno said slowly. "But I say to you, I am a Canadian."

In retrospect, Bruno's words seem the key to the whole conference. We all enjoyed each other's ideas and company, recognized our differences, mutually distrusted most of the politicians who addressed us . . . and hurt like hell when split up to take our jet home at the end of the four-day conclave.

And of course the topic of the next conference will be "Canada 103?—How Long Can Canada Hang Together?"

