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# QUEBEC'S URGE: AUTONOMY OR INDEPENDENCE?

—JEAN-FRANÇOIS LISÉE & LISE BISSONNETTE—

Quebec has entered anew on a path that may lead, as soon as this October, to a referendum on its independence. At the same time, French-Quebeckers have become a favorite target of the North American press. As we witness the return of these “Quebec-bashers”—some old pens, some new faces—on the US market of ideas, there arises a need to correct a few falsehoods gaining currency, and to provide some guidance against the sophistry and simplifications that are sure to percolate in the media coverage in the months to come. Very briefly to put Quebec’s predicament in historical context, consider this quote from a recent story in the *Wall Street Journal*:

The French-English marriage had always been uncomfortable. It was a shotgun wedding, imposed by British redcoats when they scaled the cliff below Quebec City and defeated France’s garrison there in 1759. French-Canadians rose in armed rebellion in 1837. During World War I, many refused to fight for an English king. A Quebec cabinet minister was murdered by independence-minded terrorists in 1970, and 40 percent of the province voted for “sovereignty-association” in a 1980 referendum. Quebeckers often had good reasons for resentment. Twenty years ago, the French majority still had to speak English to be served in some Montreal stores. Business was run by an English-speaking elite.<sup>1</sup>

The referendum of May 1980 marked a decisive point in the history of Quebec’s separatist movement. For the first time, Quebeckers were asked if they wanted be part of Canada, or if they would rather give their government, led by separatist René Lévesque, a mandate to bring Quebec to sovereignty, while

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1. G. Pierre Goad and John Urquhart, “House Divided,” *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 1990, 1.

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maintaining only an "economic association" with the rest of Canada. Lévesque's formidable foe in this debate was Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, also a Quebecker, but one bent on opening Canada to Francophones rather than sending them their own way.

Trudeau revolutionized Canada in 1969 when French was designated one of the country's official languages. For more than a century before then, the federal government did not use the language spoken by what was at first a third and then a quarter of its citizenry. Since 1960, successive Quebec governments, whether federalist or separatist, have requested transfers of power from Ottawa to Quebec City, the Quebec capital. In fact, one of Trudeau's federal commissions recommended, much to his dislike, that this shift should be made. Quebeckers themselves stubbornly wanted more of their affairs run by the only government on the continent that represents a majority of Francophones, that of Quebec.

Just before the May 1980 referendum, Trudeau made what is now called in Canada "the promise to Quebec." Surrounded by supporters of decentralization of power, Trudeau pledged to "put [his own party's members of parliament's] jobs on the line"<sup>2</sup> to ensure that a no vote on the referendum "would not be an indication to other Canadians that all [was] well and good, but signal that we want change." A similar promise had been made to the US Congress in 1977:

Provisions will take place, accommodations will be made, so that the Canadian confederation can be seen by 6.5 million French-speaking Canadians to be the strongest bulwark against submersion by 220 million English-speaking North Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Many, like Peter Blaikie, a leader of Quebec's English-speaking community, were quite sure that the federal government did not intend to appease Quebec's separatists in the case of a no vote on the referendum. Blaikie recently commented:

Only fools, and the elites are far from it, would believe that the then Prime Minister, having fought special status all his life, would have surrendered to Quebec's ultra-nationalists, following a referendum victory by the federalists.<sup>4</sup>

Analysts at the US State Department were among those deceived by Trudeau's promises. After the speech to the Congress one analyst wrote, "There is some evidence that Trudeau may in time come to consider some formula that

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2. Robert Sheppard and Michael Valpy, *The National Deal—The Fight for a Canadian Constitution* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 30. This book, written by two *Globe and Mail* reporters, provides an excellent accounting of the 1981-1982 negotiations.

3. Jean-François Lisée, *Dans l'oeil de l'aigle—Washington face au Québec* (Montreal: Boréal, 1990), 264.

4. Peter Blaikie, "While Canada is my Country, Québec is my Home," *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 September 1991, A11. Peter Blaikie is the former chairman of Alliance Québec, the foremost lobby of English Québeckers.

would transfer some powers to all the provinces, including Quebec."<sup>5</sup> Then again, American diplomats and analysts had been thinking for fifteen years that only special status for Quebec could stabilize Canada.

It is not known how many undecided Quebeckers shared the US State Department's view and were foolish enough not to see through the smoke and mirrors. But on the night of the referendum, 60 percent of Quebeckers voted no to the sovereignty proposal of Lévesque. And they waited for Trudeau's promise to be fulfilled.

Trudeau did launch a constitutional reform process within twenty-four hours of the referendum. Its effect, however, was to further centralize power in Ottawa, or, more specifically, to give it to federal courts. This was accomplished by way of a federal charter of rights, which took away some of Quebec's dearly-held provincial authority over language and education policy. The Quebec leadership was outraged; their province had been the first to ratify their own liberal charter of rights six years earlier. But Quebec Premier Lévesque, who won 48 percent of the vote in a multiparty race in 1981, was not alone in his opposition to Trudeau's actions. Lévesque formed an alliance with the leaders of seven of the nine other provinces who, for diverse reasons, also did not like Trudeau's grab at power.

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By the time the last round of government debate on constitutional reform concluded on November 5, 1981, Quebec's alliance had unraveled. One English province among Lévesque's allies had made an unsuccessful overture to Trudeau. Lévesque then stunned his counterparts by agreeing to Trudeau's offer of holding a country-wide referendum on the controversial charter. But this idea also fizzled and, by day's end, the constitutional reform process seemed permanently stalled. Lévesque departed for the evening and, appropriately for the drama to come, crossed the river from Ottawa, Ontario to his hotel in the Quebec city of Hull.

Throughout the evening and into the night, officials, ministers and ultimately premiers of the nine other provinces contacted each other and started working on a compromise proposal with Trudeau's staff—Quebec's absence made the

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5. Lisée, 468.

negotiation process easier. By dawn, English-Canada had a deal with Trudeau. Lévesque found out about the clandestine discussions, known now in Quebec as the "night of long knives," when he arrived for a scheduled strategy breakfast with his former allies. It soon became obvious that Trudeau's promise to Quebec would not be fulfilled, but rather it had been replaced by a collective slap in the face. Neither Lévesque, nor his successor and federalist rival Robert Bourassa, would ever sign the compromise reforms. Thus, a quarter of the country's population never agreed to the massive constitutional changes that resulted from the evening's collaborations.

As stated by the current Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to the *Chicago Tribune*, "This would be as if George Bush revised the US constitution, and it was endorsed by the governors of all the states... except New York, California, Texas and Illinois."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, a large majority of English-Canadians embraced the new constitution and the charter of rights, making it one of English-Canada's most unifying documents.

Quebec-bashers are at their most creative when trying to explain away these late-night negotiations. The first line of argument contends that Lévesque was a separatist and never would have signed any agreement, therefore a compromise could only be reached in his absence. If this is true, why was Lévesque invited to the negotiations in the first place? In fact, Lévesque had co-signed with his seven allies a finite list of demands and had obligated himself, if these were met, to sign on to the reforms. And why, if Lévesque was such a radical separatist, did seven provinces ally themselves with this self-interested Quebecer for more than a year?

The second line of argument points to the fact that seventy-two pro-Trudeau federal legislators from Quebec voted for the deal in the Ottawa Parliament, and were thus representing Quebec's true interests. What is omitted from this statement is that only seventeen of these legislators kept their seats in the following election, while the others were defeated by politicians who loathed the deal and promised to correct the "humiliation" of the November night.<sup>7</sup>

The third line of argument asserts that Lévesque excluded himself from the nocturnal negotiations because he had broken his alliance with the seven English provinces. It is claimed that his eagerness to accept Trudeau's offer of a referendum on the charter alienated him. This implies that Lévesque's downfall was due to the fact that he was too flexible toward Trudeau. If this were true, he should have been the first one invited to the "pajama party" and recruited to help peel away some of Trudeau's other foes. As a final explanation of Quebec's absence that evening, one of the key English negotiators claimed, "They just weren't around!"<sup>8</sup>

By 1987, both Lévesque and Trudeau were out of office. Robert Bourassa was back at Quebec's helm, and Brian Mulroney was running Ottawa, Mulroney

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6. Storer H. Rowley, "Two Visions of Canada, and Both Have Failed," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 January 1990, 1.

7. That number is now reduced to twelve, and two have since become separatists.

8. Sheppard and Valpy, 295.

having won votes in Quebec by promising to bring the province back in the constitutional fold "with honour and enthusiasm."<sup>9</sup> Bourassa listed five basic conditions for Quebec's reintegration, instead of the twenty-five demands held by previous Quebec governments.

On April 30, 1987, at a reunion in the federally-owned cottage at Meech Lake, Bourassa, Mulroney and the nine other provincial premiers met to discuss Quebec's reintegration in what was to be known as the Meech Lake Accord. Two of Bourassa's five demands pertained specifically to Quebec, the most famous being recognition of the French province as a "distinct society." Bourassa suggested this in a spirit of compromise, as opposed to terms such as a "people" or a "nation," those by which Quebecers define themselves (Quebec's parliament is called the National Assembly). The point of the "distinct society" clause, to be placed near the top of the constitution, was to instruct the Canadian Supreme Court that, in close decisions, the constitution should be interpreted in ways which would help Quebec in "preserving and promoting" its distinct culture. Bourassa's hope was that this would give Quebec more legislative power in as of yet undefined areas. The other Quebec-specific demand concerned a guarantee that three of the nine Supreme Court judges would be appointed from Quebec's judicial system.

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Quebec's other three conditions created some interesting complications. Quebec's demands included more provincial control over immigration because of language concerns, the right to opt out of new federal programs infringing on provincial jurisdictions, and a veto right for all new constitutional amendments affecting Quebec's representation in federal institutions.<sup>10</sup> The other nine provincial premiers refused to agree to these demands unless they could obtain the same deal. As Quebec had no objections to this, everyone went ahead and signed the accord. The Ontario premier exclaimed, "Welcome back to Canada," and Bourassa answered "I am proud to be a Canadian."

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9. Andrew A. Cohen, *A Deal Undone* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), 68.

10. It was believed that Quebec had this veto power already, and it was actually used on occasion.

In 1982 the Canadian Supreme Court held that Canadian constitutional experts had been misinformed on this point for more than 100 years.

But the document the ten premiers signed was only an "agreement in principle." The negotiators were obliged to have it ratified by their constituencies. Although all ten premiers controlled majorities in their provincial parliaments, ratification was held up in two of the provinces as criticism mounted against the new agreement. Critics, led by Pierre Trudeau, claimed that these constitutional amendments decentralized the country to an intolerable extent, especially at a time when the free-trade agreement with the United States was already weakening the country's fabric. Opponent also took issue with the "veto for everybody" provision, which made it very difficult to amend the constitution further. Moreover, Trudeau and his followers were discontent with the fact that Quebec benefited most from the deal. The aim at Meech Lake of reintegrating Quebec, which remained the only province not to have signed the constitution, was lost in the fury.

Two signatories to the provisional agreement were replaced in elections before they had the time and the will to have it ratified. In Newfoundland, new Premier Clyde Wells actually had the ratification rescinded. Wells said he could not accept the "distinct society" clause because it created "an enhanced status for Quebec as a super province [with] its citizens having a preferential position."<sup>11</sup> This opinion was shared by a majority of English-Canadians. Consequently, Quebec was caught in a classic "Catch-22" situation. Quebec was criticized if it asked for special status because this was inequitable, but it was also criticized for helping devise a proposal under which all provinces receive equal gains, since this would cause too much decentralization.

But the negative reaction of English-Canada was less a rejection of Quebec than a collision of two differing visions for the future of Canada. A growing number of English-Canadians desired a more cohesive country, with national policies that defied provincial borders. Quebecers, on the other hand, distrusted federal institutions and wanted to rely on their own provincial government, which was responsible for transforming Quebec's backward economy of 1959 to one with a gross national product the size of Austria's in 1991. This comparison is appropriate at many levels, since Quebec has developed an economic model closer to those of Austria or Germany, while the rest of Canada has moved toward the American and British models.

Mulroney and Bourassa believed these divergent goals could be reconciled through the flexible "distinct society" approach. Others, well-represented by Clyde Wells, did not agree. "It is impossible to write a constitution that is acceptable to both visions of Canada," said Wells. "The two visions can not coexist."<sup>12</sup> In June of 1990, the three-year legal delay for ratification of the Meech Lake Accord ran out. As Newfoundland and Manitoba still had not signed, the second attempt to fulfill the promise had failed.

Historically, opinion polls in Quebec registered at most 50 percent in favor of sovereignty; by 1990 that figure was closer to 70 percent. Nevertheless, Bourassa convinced most Quebecers to give federalism one last chance, and

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11. Rowley, "Two Visions of Canada."

12. *Ibid.*

this enabled him to bide time for more than two years. Ultimately, however, absent any satisfactory proposal from the rest of Canada, he was forced by his own federalist party to agree to a public referendum on sovereignty in October 1992. Commissions were set up and new lists of demands were created. This time Quebec would not settle for five minimal demands. Bourassa's party drew up a list of twenty-two issue areas that it now wanted under the exclusive jurisdiction of Quebec. Quebec would share nine others, such as immigration and justice, with Ottawa. Defense, monetary policy, and only some economic and foreign policy would then be left to the federal government.

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Mulroney is in a tight spot; a recent Gallup poll showed that 92 percent of Canadians outside Quebec reject any notion of special status for Quebec. Whereas there is great willingness to consent to massive devolution of power to the Canadian Natives, there is little political will to give more autonomy to Quebec.

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In the end, however, when Brian Mulroney unveiled his new constitutional reform proposals last September, he had actually retreated from about half of the "minimal demands" he had agreed to at Meech Lake, and instead proposed to concentrate massive economic power in Ottawa. Mulroney then backtracked on the economic union proposal in early 1992, but endorsed a parliamentary report that recommended eviscerating the distinct society clause and sharing with Quebec, under federal conditions, powers the constitution originally gave exclusively to Quebec. The unusually soft-spoken Bourassa called this "domineering federalism." Mulroney is in a tight spot; a recent Gallup poll showed that 92 percent of Canadians outside Quebec reject any notion of special status for Quebec. Whereas there is great willingness to consent to massive devolution of power to the Canadian Natives, who currently have six out of seventeen representatives at the Constitutional table, there is little political will to give more autonomy to Quebec.

Today the debate has moved back to the underlying question: Is sovereignty for Quebec worth leaving the blessings of Canada behind? The polls in Quebec go back and forth on this issue, and the question cannot be answered here. However, since the viability and territorial integrity of an independent Quebec will most certainly be at issue in the future, it may be of interest to consider a recently declassified 1977 study conducted jointly by the US State Department, the CIA, the National Security Council and the Treasury Department. This study was written for the Secretary of State and the White House when Quebec first prepared for a referendum on the subject of its independence, and offered the following perspective:

Quebec does meet generally accepted criteria for national self-determination in the sense of ethnic distinctiveness in a clearly defined geographic area with an existing separate legal and governmental system. There is also no question regarding the basic long-term viability of an independent Quebec in the economic sense or in regard to its ability to be a responsible member of the family of nations.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that Quebec's home-grown economy is much stronger now than it was at the time of the report, making Quebec an even better candidate for sovereignty today. In fact, the report added, "Quebec would certainly be a more viable state than most UN members."

Since there is no exact equivalent to the French Quebec predicament, a hypothetical example may provide further insight. Imagine that, 300 years ago, an English-speaking state called Wisconsin was established in South America. It now contains five million English-speaking residents who are surrounded by 250 million Spanish-speaking people. Spanish TV, music, movies, politics, stars and social trends flow in and around Wisconsin incessantly. Moreover, assume that Spanish, not English, is becoming the international lingua franca of economics and science. English-speaking Wisconsinites, however, have survived two conquests by Spanish armies and two attempts at assimilation by the Spanish. Waking up from a century-long defensive posture, Wisconsinites began thirty years ago to reclaim their economic and social policy from their inner Spanish minority. They have imposed English on their streets, in the schools of their newly-arrived immigrants, in their relations with their Spanish bosses in the factories, and even in their business councils.

Is it desirable that the Wisconsinites continue to live and prosper in English in this Spanish-dominated environment, as they have done until now? If the answer is no, then everything these people do to fend off Spanish influence will be seen as backward, petty and useless. If the answer is yes, then the people of Wisconsin are entitled to take a number of reasonable measures to keep Spanish at bay, all the while mending bridges with their Spanish neighbours. This is exactly what Quebec is doing, albeit with a mixture of competence and incompetence that one encounters in any modern democracy.

This transposition is helpful in neutralizing the English superiority complex many Americans seem to carry subconsciously when reacting to the Quebec question. Snickers abound when one discovers that Quebeckers have replaced "Stop" road signs by "Arrêt" signs. Think of Wisconsin changing "Alto" on every corner of their English cities to "Stop"—somehow it seems more acceptable when presented in these terms.

Just one final step in this "put yourself in our shoes" game: If you were interested in knowing more about the English/Wisconsin situation, would you systematically turn to members of its inner Spanish minority for complete and

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13. Lisée, 479.



fair coverage? Sadly, this is exactly what the American press has been doing in the last few decades. Stephen Baker, an American journalist in Washington who conducted a study on the way the American media covered Canada in the mid-1980s, concluded:

Virtually everything the United States hears about French-Canada comes from English-Canadians. In US newspapers and magazines and on radio and television, Quebec news (on those rare occasions that it travels across the border) is gathered, edited and presented by Anglo-Canadians. That US news services have opted to let Canadians report the news for them instead of seeing for themselves is remarkable.<sup>14</sup>

When looking for a Quebec writer to give readers more insight, American magazines tend to hire English-Montrealers for their balanced view. We would not mind, of course, if French writers—a good number do write in English—were also approached once in a decade. But the last major US magazine to commission a French writer on this issue did so in 1964.

A favorite Quebec voice for the American press is Montreal author Mordecai Richler. Richler has appeared twice in *The Atlantic Monthly* since 1977 and wrote a piece last year for *The New Yorker*. A superbly talented writer and author of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and a number of other novels about Montreal's Jewish community, Richler is probably on a short list for a Nobel Prize. However, he does not speak French, which is no way a fault. It merely lends proof to the contention that you can go from cradle to grave in Quebec without understanding what the huge majority of people around you says and thinks. Nevertheless, the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker* feel that Richler is a splendid choice for reporter at large to explain Quebec affairs to their readers.

Richler wrote that the Quebec government's efforts since the 1960s to promote the use of French and discourage assimilation of new immigrants into the English minority has reinforced a "disconcertingly tribal society."<sup>15</sup> The word "tribal" is often used by Quebec-bashers, and always with respect to Quebecers' stubbornness about maintaining a French environment. Yet Quebecers' intake of foreign cultural products—books, films, movies, magazines, music—measures favorably to that of any other North American state or province. With more than 60 percent of the adult French population able to carry on a conversation in English, Quebec is the North American region most proficient in a second language.<sup>16</sup> It is precisely because Quebecers are avid consumers of both North American and European trends that their own culture is so rich, a fact to which any fair observer of Quebec music, cinema, dance,

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14. Stephen Baker, "How America Sees Quebec," *International Perspectives* (February, 1983): 13-17.

15. Mordecai Richler, "Inside/Outside," *The New Yorker*, 23 September 1991, 40, 92.

16. From a poll in Quebec's magazine *L'actualité* (January, 1992). The figure for English Canada is 24 percent.

design, and circus can attest. Moreover, how would a tribal society have enough commercial sensibility to sell approximately half of all its goods and services outside its own territory?<sup>17</sup>

Richler has recently published a new book which raises the need to address his widespread yet ludicrous accusations of rampant anti-Semitism in the province of Quebec.<sup>18</sup> Richler has a history of pushing this point; in a 1977 article in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine, Richler falsely accused the separatist Parti Québécois of having adopted a Nazi song as a theme song.<sup>19</sup> Then Quebec Premier René Lévesque, who had been one of the first journalists to view the German concentration camp Dachau and who was until his death sympathetic to Israel, would forever be beset with charges of anti-Semitism during his visits to the United States. Richler, who never apologized for his incorrect statement, now calls it an "embarrassing gaffe."<sup>20</sup>

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Although figures compiled by the Canadian B'nai Brith organization show that there were over four times as many anti-Semitic acts in 1991 in Toronto, Ontario alone than in the whole province of Quebec,<sup>21</sup> Richler now quotes a study purporting to show that "over 70 percent of Quebecers fall into our highly anti-Semitic category." This would put Quebec in the range of Nazi Germany circa 1937. This poll, conducted by James Fletcher of York University in Toronto, has been severely criticized by the Canadian Jewish Congress as being flawed. Among other things, the pollsters asked different questions of French and English respondents and then proceeded to compare them.<sup>22</sup> A widely respected poll by professors Robert Brym and Rhonda Lenton shows that 5 percent of Canadians and 9 percent of Quebecers can be termed highly

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17. In 1984, Richler himself wrote that "so far as one can generalize, the most gracious, cultivated and innovative people in this country [Canada] are French Canadians."

18. Mordecai Richler, *Oh Canada! Oh Québec!* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1992).

19. Mordecai Richler, "Oh Canada! Lament for a Divided Country/Oh Canada! Plainte pour un pays désuni," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1977, 41-55.

20. Richler, *Oh Canada! Oh Québec!*, 129.

21. Catherine Wallace, "Anti-Semitism on the rise in Canada," *The Gazette*, 11 February 1992, B1. In 1990, Ontario registered three times more of these acts than Quebec.

22. For a discussion of this issue, see Michael Crelisten, "Le Congrès juif canadien ne partage pas les généralisations acerbes de Richler," *La Presse*, 26 March 1992, B3. Crelisten is director-general of the Québec branch of the American Jewish Congress.

anti-Semitic, which is 61 percent lower than the figure Richler quotes.<sup>23</sup> Richler knows about the flaws in the poll, but repeats its erroneous results nonetheless. He never uses the B'Nai Brith figures on anti-Semitic acts, since they contradict his whole thesis.

This new round of excessive rhetoric, soon to hit the American conference and media circuit, saddens most people in Quebec. Montreal's English daily newspaper, a fierce critic of Quebec's successive governments, wrote in a recent editorial that "Mr. Richler's words have caused Quebecers real and unjustified pain ... By almost any measure, Quebec is a tolerant and decent society."<sup>24</sup>

As much as French-Quebeckers are concerned with the sanctity of their language, they clearly are not interested in racial purity. When thousands of flag-waving separatists march through the streets roaring "Le Quebec aux Québécois," among their ranks are people with names such as Burns, O'Neill, Dean, Johnson, Milner, and Assimopoulos. These are the names of three former separatist cabinet ministers, one separatist premier, one member of the Parti Québécois executive committee, and one president of the separatist party. Recent statistics of civil weddings show that out of one-hundred Franco-Quebeckers, twelve marry non-French partners. This data, while fragmentary, points to a remarkably unimpeded relationship between the majority and the minorities, since there are only seventeen English or ethnic Quebecker per one-hundred Franco-Quebeckers.

Many observers think French-Quebeckers should leave their future to the free market of languages on the continent. Historically, this market has not been kind to French-speaking Louisianians, nor to French-Canadians in other provinces. For instance, when Manitoba was created in 1870, half of its inhabitants were French speaking. Now they number less than 3 percent, although the illegal assimilation policies of the Manitoba government contributed to this low figure.

The federal Canadian policy of two official languages introduced by Trudeau in 1969 did much to improve the situation nationally. According to recent federal studies, however, almost a quarter of a century of official bilingualism has only moderately slowed down the assimilation rate of French-Canadians outside Quebec.<sup>25</sup> West of Ontario, assimilation runs at between 55 and 66 percent per generation, while lower percentages register on the edges of Quebec. Only within Quebec has the assimilation process come to a complete halt, where the French-speaking population has increased to the 1951 level of 83 percent, after a drop to 81 percent in 1971 when the need for linguistic legislation became most evident.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, benign neglect of the linguistic issue is

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23. Robert J. Brym and Rhonda L. Lenton, "The Distribution of Anti-Semitism in Canada in 1984," *Viewpoints—The Canadian Jewish Periodical*, 5 December 1991. They also write that the data "lends no support to the view that Québec nationalists were more anti-Semitic than non-nationalists," which contradicts Richler's main contention.

24. "Richler's distorted mirror," *Gazette*, 21 March 1992, B2.

25. Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, *Langue et Société*, publication No. 35, 1991.

26. *Langue et Société*. The statistic for 1986, expressed as an "index of continuity," shows that 46 percent of French-speakers continue to use French in the West and Northern Canada as a whole.

not the favored policy of Quebeckers.

Richler and others are concerned about the rights of the English community in Quebec. The topic is pertinent and worthy. When the Quebec separatist movement was created in the 1960s, certain radicals suggested that the English in Quebec be treated exactly as the French were treated in the rest of Canada. This suggestion, however, was immediately rejected by Quebec separatists and moderates alike—it would have amounted to cruel and unusual punishment. Did the French want to strip control over their schools from the English, in some cases deny them schools altogether? Take away their numerous radio and TV stations, their control over their hospitals? Imitate the actions of the Alberta legislature, which recently tried to force a French representative to apologize for having spoken French without permission? The English minority of Quebec has the right to the full gamut of services in their own language. They built most of their institutions through their own efforts and off the profits of English-owned corporations which once dominated Quebec. As Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney himself said in one of numerous debates on the issue, "It is important to emphasize that Quebec has no lesson to learn from anyone regarding its way of treating its language minorities. . . I think Quebec is a leader in this field."<sup>27</sup>

In fact, some provisions of the much maligned 1977 Quebec language law make the English community in Quebec a privileged lot. Only they have the right to choose between English and French schools; the French majority took this right away from itself and all future immigrants, who are required to attend French schools.<sup>28</sup> In 1977, the Quebec government tried to trick other provinces into providing more French schools to their Francophone minorities by mandating that English schools in Quebec would not be open to Canadians arriving from other provinces unless these provinces agreed to provide French schools for Quebeckers moving there. The other provinces protested this stipulation, and the Canadian Supreme Court invalidated this part of the Quebec law shortly thereafter. As testimony to the strength of English influence on the continent, even fourteen years after the French-school-for-immigrants provision was passed, there is still much more assimilation of immigrants into English-speaking Quebec than the demographics of the population would warrant.

English-Quebeckers are massively opposed to the language law, and as many as 200,000 have left Quebec in the last fifteen years. A number were scared off by the election of a separatist party in 1976 and chose to vote with their feet. Many just wanted to remain Canadians, whatever happened. Many were tempted by better economic opportunities as the commercial center of the country moved West in the late 1970s, even though Quebec's economy outran Canada's average in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, although not in Montreal proper.

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27. Quoted in *Globe and Mail*, 20 December 1988.

28. This, by the way, does not apply to foreigners coming to Quebec for a definite period, such as managers from an American corporation assigned to a Quebec plant.

There is no question that the French majority's efforts to reclaim Quebec culture from the English community has created tensions. Acrimony and resistance to change, as well as unreasonable provisions in the language law have all contributed to this strife. At the heart of the uneasiness, however, is the English community's sense of a "Paradise Lost" in Quebec, and no amount of compensating measures will ever make them feel differently. Many young Anglo-Quebeckers are convinced that they are discriminated against in hirings. But a full 24 percent of all private-sector management jobs in Quebec are currently held by members of the English community which amounts to 240 percent of their real weight in the population. Twenty-five years ago, more than 50 percent of all these management jobs were held by Anglophones.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, as the number of job opportunities continues to shrink, the feeling of decline becomes unavoidable. Simply put, the English minority is merely losing the benefits of inequality.

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Another major issue of concern for the English community is the Quebec sign law. Current legislation prohibits most stores from posting English or bilingual signs outside their stores. Bilingual signs are allowed only inside small stores, and some businesses such as banks are not covered by the law at all. Any language besides English is allowed; Montreal's Chinatown is filled with signs in Chinese. The law is enforced by inspectors who will issue a few warnings and then fine businesses for not complying with the law.

The sign law is a reaction to the experience of the free market of languages that existed through the late 1960s, when most store signs in downtown Mon-

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29. No single set of statistics for the linguistic origin of managers has been kept over the years. In his book, *Quebec Inc.* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1987), *Globe and Mail* reporter Matthew Fraser writes: "During the 1960s the ranks of anglophones in middle-management positions in Quebec corporations were swollen out of proportion: 80 percent were English-speaking...In senior executive offices, 60 percent were anglophones but only 14 percent of them spoke French. Of the 40 percent francophone executive-level managers, 78 percent spoke English...Most francophone executives held "internal relations" and "public relations positions..." (71).

A more current figure of 24 percent is taken from Pierre Bouchard, *Les enjeux de la francisation des entreprises au Quebec (1977-1984)*, Office de la langue française du Quebec, 1991. Another good discussion of these issues can be found in the study by American scholar Mark V. Levine, *The Reconquest of Montreal-Language Policy and Social Change in a Bilingual City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

trepreneur were in English. One could drive through the city without ever thinking a majority of the people living there were French speakers. Consequently, Quebecers have acted on their desire to live in an environment that is a reflection of their own culture, which is overwhelmingly French. They would like "Quebec to be as French as Ontario is English," as the saying goes.

Elsewhere on the continent, market forces naturally impose English as the language on the majority of signs. The case is not the same for market forces in Quebec. In matters that are not currently, nor planned to be, regulated by the language law, the unilingual use of English is rampant, even when most customers have no idea what the business is trying to say. For example, the play on words in "Toys 'R' Us" is lost on most young French customers; but that is what the store will be called, even in Quebec City suburbs. Equally puzzling to most is the meaning of "Journey's End," a relatively new hotel chain that is opening branches across the province. And while Kellogg takes the trouble to sell *Zucharitos* in Mexico, it continues to sell them as "Frosted Flakes" in the totally French-speaking city of Chicoutimi. The list of examples is endless. Self-regulation has proven disappointing outside the scope of the sign law, and English words are pervasively present in the Quebec linguistic landscape.

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The sign law is a reaction to the experience of the free market of languages that existed through the late 1960s, when most store signs in downtown Montreal were in English. One could drive through the city without ever thinking a majority of the people living there were French speakers.

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So, why bother with a sign law? Until about twenty years ago, most tire stores in Quebec would have the English word "tire" printed on their sign. The French word for tire, "pneu," was not to be found. As a result, a great many Quebecers took to calling a "pneu" a "tire," and the English word took hold, as did hundreds of other English words like it. Now on all signs and advertisements—except for store and brand names such as Canadian Tire—businesses have to use "pneu" rather than "tire." Gradually, "pneu" has won over "tire" in the French spoken language, as have hundreds of other French words like it. Is the sign law the reason for this, or is it more generally the new surge of pride and self-confidence that has built up over the last thirty years? Either way, the trend is a welcome one, as it serves to support the integrity of the French language. Would a bilingual sign "pneu-tire" have done the trick? This is more difficult to predict, but what is clear is that it would not have signaled that a switch from "tire" to "pneu" was proper.

In a 1988 review of the sign law, the Canadian Supreme Court held that

Quebec had the right to impose a formula ensuring that, on signs, "the predominant language would be French." Quebec could not, however, ban English from signs altogether. Using a legal escape hatch, Quebec reimposed a softer version of its law, allowing bilingual signs inside some stores. In addition, the Quebec government has been looking to introduce a number of exceptions which would allow English-only signs to be used for a number of specific cultural ventures. Bilingual signs in tourist areas would also be accepted.

The changes have been welcomed as needed and fair, but federalists and separatists disagreed on their timing. Provisions that would allow English or bilingual signs in cities where the English community comprises a significant portion of the population makes sense to a growing number of French-Canadians. It is nonsense for a unilingual Anglophone in a predominantly English neighborhood not to be able to read "potatoes on sale" in his local supermarket. This regional option has been rejected by most English leaders. Clearly, in this one instance where the rights of the French majority step on the toes of English individual rights, further fine-tuning of the law is needed.

Distasteful as it may be, the Quebec sign law is respectful of the current constitution, which Quebec itself did not sign. By contrast, many English provinces, which did sign the constitution ten years ago, are still refusing to abide by their obligation to give French-speaking parents control over their own school boards. In Quebec, both English and native minorities control their own boards. In the opinion of Montreal's daily *The Gazette*, generally voicing itself as no friend of Quebec nationalism, "that refusal or delay is a permanent scandal, divisive and destructive of national unity."<sup>30</sup>

American scholar and one-time US State Department Canada-desk officer Joseph Jockel of St. Lawrence University sees "a double standard at work" in the assessments that observers make of the Canadian linguistic crisis. In a recent essay, Jockel noted:

In April 1988, Saskatchewan adopted legislation overriding French language rights at the provincial level...In June 1988, the Alberta government introduced (and adopted) legislation extinguishing the right to use French in the legislature.<sup>31</sup>

In the American press, the grievances of the English and native minorities of Quebec get superb play. By comparison, after reviewing all the American press had written in 1990-1991 about Quebec, we failed to spot a single paragraph on the plight of the French minority in Canada outside of Quebec.<sup>32</sup>

It is obvious that Quebeckers do care a great deal about their image abroad, and may be oversensitive to the opinion of others. This is the lot of all small nations. As writers for two French-Quebec publications who share this concern,

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30. William Johnson, "French needs boost in rest of Canada," *The Gazette*, 7 December 1991, B3.

31. Joseph T. Jockel, "If Canada Breaks Up: Implications for US Policy," *Canadian-American Public Policy* No. 7 (September 1991): 41.

32. From press reviews provided by the Quebec Department of International Affairs, 1991.

however, we do not ask for preferential treatment from America. We just ask for fairness. Americans should hear all sides of the debate and seek their own answers to tough questions. And critics of French Quebec should ask themselves how they would react if this tale were about Wisconsinites.

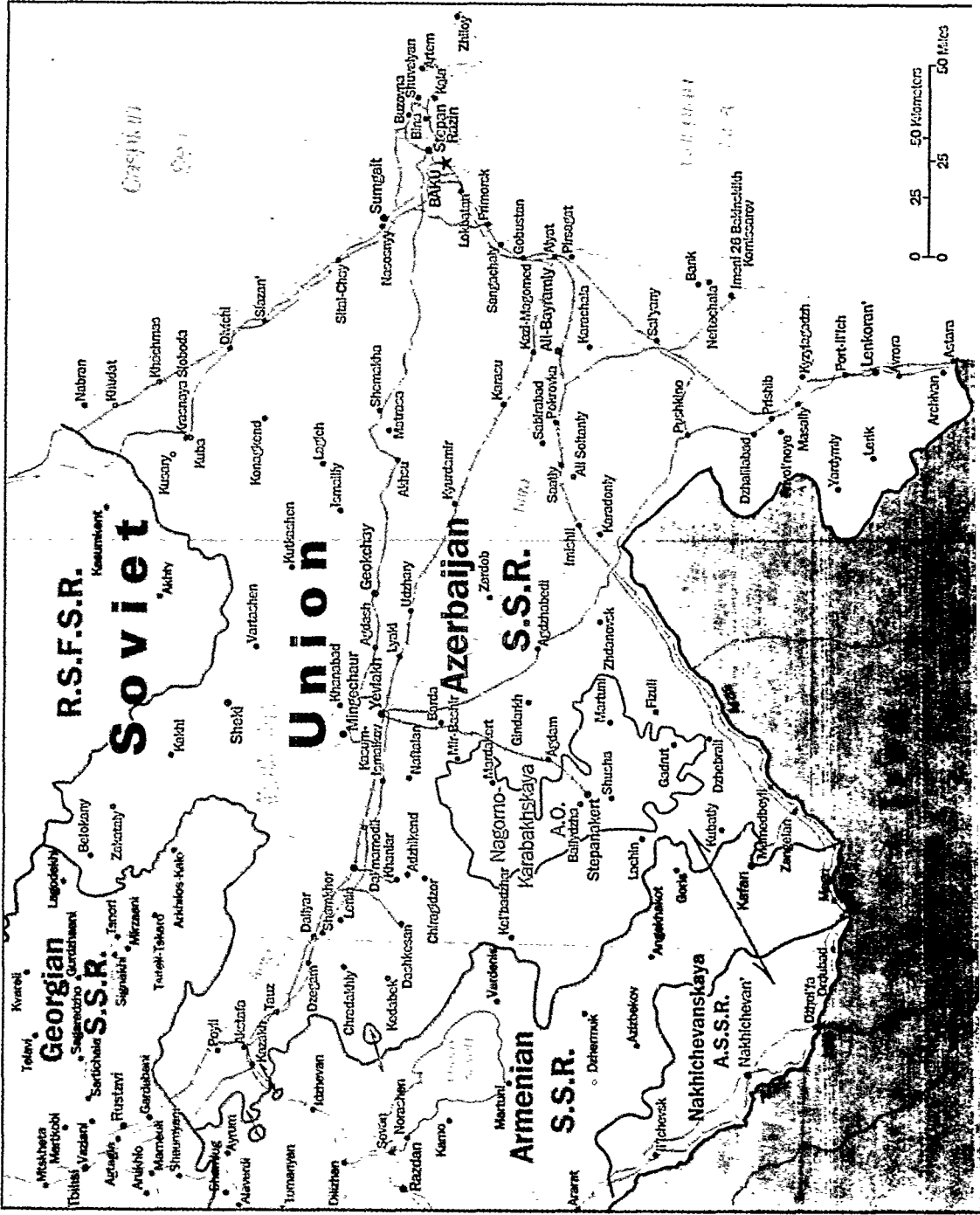
We wish we could forecast the outcome of the referendum on sovereignty now planned for this October. It is even impossible to predict whether Quebec's Premier Robert Bourassa will hold this referendum, delay it, or pose a completely different question to voters, as he himself has publicly discussed over the past few months.

Much will depend on the boldness of the "final offers" that the Canadian government, together with the other provinces, will make to Quebec in late May or early June. The more autonomy the offers will give Quebec, the less likely it will be that Quebecers choose to leave Canada. But English-Canada has been insisting on the concept of "equality of the provinces," and the chances of reaching meaningful compromise between such divergent views of how the country should run seem remote. The suspense lies in the fact that Quebecers do not feel an urge to become independent. They feel only an itch.









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