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Unilingualism or Cultural Schizophrenia

A Choice for Quebec ¹

HENRI WITTMANN

There is much evidence that what politicians are today they have been throughout the ages. Likewise there are age-old desires to camouflage the inevitable attributes of any badly-managed society: failure and self-defeat. In ancient times, a goat, laden with all the blames, would be sent into the wilderness by the chief-priest (a typical political figure of those days), to remedy the situation. In more recent history, Hitler invented the Jewish question and the Americans the Viet Cong in addition to the Negro problem. Individuals often behave exactly like nations. Personal failures are often blamed on institutions, such as the Church. Practitioners of this ritual conveniently forget that Jews, Vietnamese, Negroes, as well as the Church, can very well take care of themselves, if only we *let them*. If a woman refuses to take the pill on the pope's authority rather than on her own, she has only herself to blame. Her sacrifice is needless and even masochistic in tendency, since today the Church does not have any real power over our lives. Nor do Jews or Negroes. Such power may at times *seem* to exist, but it can be negated simply by taking care of oneself before aspiring to take care of others.

What is the "French-Canadian Problem"? It is one of those figments of the imagination, a pseudo-problem created by people unable to take care of themselves: English Canadians. We should like to suggest here a remedy of great simplicity: the separation of the so-called "founding nations" of the Canadian Confederation. Separation alone will enable both of the protagonists to take care of themselves. Consequently, the "French-Canadian Problem" will simply cease to exist.

Collective obsessions are not only largely made up of words, but are also vulnerable to words, unless word-proof. For this reason, we chose words over bullets to drive home our suggestion. The words most often recurring in this controversy are *nation, language, race, religion*, and lastly *bilingualism*. We should like to subject our reader to a close scrutiny of the concepts underlying these words.

The dictionary defines "nation" as an aggregation of persons, most often associated with a particular territory, speaking the same language. Almost as an afterthought, it adds a second meaning to the first: a body of people associated with a particular territory who are sufficiently conscious

of their unity to seek or to possess a government peculiarly their own. Curiously enough, English Canada only qualifies for the second definition, if at all, since her consciousness of unity is very much open to doubt. There is no doubt, however, that most English-Canadians share with their American neighbors the same aspiration in addition to a common language. None other than the Dean of Law at McGill University claims that "a very large part of (McGill University's) impetus is derived from being treated as a peer among the great North American universities. Its natural intellectual links, administrative and student patterns of organization are with Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Columbia, etc. It belongs to the great eastern seaboard system of university life", and ad nauseam.² There exists, of course, a minute but militant minority who would want itself to be nation building. We wish them well, but we don't think that French-Canada can be helpful in any way.

Québec, on the other hand, qualifies as a "nation", both in the first meaning and, conditionally, in the second. The condition here reflects the Québec government's present inability to override Ottawa's hegemony, in spite of its own "premier ministre" and a nominal "assemblée nationale". Hence Ottawa's anxiousness to explain that the two-nation concept expounded by some of its French-Canadian politicians refers to "nation" in a sociological sense. Many English-Canadians avoid this terminological dilemma by referring to the two "founding races", if they are at all inclined to leave to French-Canada anything short of assimilation.³

This confusion of "language" and "race" is, of course, more than simply unacceptable. Language (and its underlying culture) is a "skill" acquired, supposing at least implicit acceptance of a mental bond to other members of that language community. The bond is one that can be renegated under certain circumstances; new affinities can be acquired. Racial features are a biological circumstance man is born with, a circumstance that can neither be attenuated nor altered in any way in an individual's life span. Understanding between two given individuals cannot be impeded by their racial differences but only by a language barrier existing between them. From this, it would seem that racial differences are trivial to man's existence. The same cannot be said about language.

Physiological criteria might lead us to assume that the natural transmission of traits from parents to offspring is halted when the umbilical cord is cut. This is not so, since the child's new environment replaces the womb functionally. The environment is not so much made up of objects but of human variables such as the parents, who in turn are extensions of something larger than the family unit: a cultural collectivity. The child acquires through this environment not only a set of individual imperatives, but also a set of collective ones, which means that they are felt and shared by most. A collective imperative is nothing but a set of "prejudices" to look at a "reality" in one way rather than in another. Prejudices have their roots in the religious past⁴ and are transmitted in such ways that they may be seen or heard, felt or understood collectively. But the most important instrument of collective understanding is a common language. Language is the umbilical cord through which the blood of cultural continuity runs.

Considering this function of language, it is hardly surprising to hear Jean-Paul Vinay, a professional linguist, conclude that man is not made to be bilingual, that two linguistic codes *competing* in the same mind inevitably lead to conflict.⁵ Interestingly enough, Mr. Vinay is a "perfect" French-English bilingual, at least as close as you can come to being one. Vinay's views contrast strangely with the linguistic romanticism of Messrs. Wilder Penfield and W. E. Lambert, whose bilingualisms are considerably less than perfect. The same applies to Québec politicians. Jean Lesage's English is less than elegant compared to René Lévesque's articulateness, whereas Pierre Bourgault, more radical in his political views than the last two speaks also the most polished English. On the other hand, the off-handedness in dealing with the language problem by unilinguals in both French and English Canada is disconcerting. In other words, it takes a bilingual to *know* about bilingualism just as it takes a Vietnamese to *tell* you about napalm.

Of course, there are variables, when talking about bilingualism, or even multilingualism for that matter. Bilingualism may be considered as it affects an individual or a whole nation. The "conflict" referred to by Vinay may be either on a purely formal level (linguistic interference) or on both the formal and an emotional level. For instance, we know the case of two little girls in Montréal, bilingual English-German, where that conflict is purely formal, and there is little chance that it will assume emotional proportions in later years. This is simply so, because English and German co-exist in a framework unlikely to bear pressures on the individual's mind. This is not so when two languages co-exist on the same territory with institutionalized priority given to neither of them. Obviously, it is left to the individual's initiative as to *which* of the two is used as the working language. Individuals will always tend to prefer the side whose collective imperatives they share and whose language they speak already. On the other hand, individuals of economic means will be able to force individuals of the other side to become bilingual. It is one thing to learn another language because you *want* to, quite another because you *have* to. Learning a foreign language not only means learning a bunch of words; it involves *absorbing* the cultural values *and* the collective imperatives of those who speak that language, if understanding is to be achieved at all. The average human mind resents such an imposition.⁶ To complicate matters further, the economically stronger may attract large numbers of immigrants, either of his own kind or of another willing to be assimilated, and thus effectively offset the balance in his favor. Since one side always turns out to be stronger, the situation inevitably generates dissatisfaction on the disadvantaged side; the bilinguals necessarily constitute the driving force behind the protest movement. We also know, from examining all similar cases recorded in history, that circumstantial "bilingualism" of this sort is never there to stay: one language always succeeds in dominating and eventually displacing the other. It remains to be seen only who displaces whom. Where the dissatisfied constitute the majority, the dilemma is as follows: what the dissatisfied majority lacks in power the more powerful minority lacks in numbers. The outbreak of violence should surprise no one under these circumstances.⁷

Québec's actual situation is a case in point. That does not mean that Québec's case is without precedent or parallel in history; quite to the contrary,

there are numerous "case histories". What is today the Czech Republic, for instance, was conquered in the Middle Ages by a German-speaking minority. It is ironic that the first German university was not founded in Berlin or Vienna but in *Prague*. Both Berlin and Vienna were as yet insignificant when Charles V, the then German Emperor, established a university in a place thought to be the intellectual centre of the German-speaking world of that time. Some of the most prominent figures in German life and letters since then have hailed from Bohemia, not least, *Kafka*. By the time the First World War broke out, the Germans had managed to be one third of the population. In 1918, the Czechs achieved some sort of self-rule. A Czech university was founded to lead a precarious existence in the shadows of the venerable Charles University.⁸ In the years leading up to the events of 1939, the Germans did not impose on the Czech any phoney "act of confederation";⁹ as a matter of fact, they didn't have to. In 1939, Hitler had already realized most of his PanGerman dream. A sea of 100 million German speaking people surrounding Bohemia, he told the Czechs, didn't give them a chance for survival. Soon enough, the Czechs were enjoying all the advantages that a strong central government, in Berlin, could provide. The rest is common history. After the Second World War, a left-wing government came to power in Prague. It deported *all* the Germans and nationalized their property.

An English-Canadian friend, a poet and writer and by no means a separatist, explained one day that to him, an English-speaking environment had been and would always be essential to his work and existence, because it provided him with the visual and auditory stimuli necessary to evolve in his language. English-Canadians, in general, are unaware of how important an English-speaking environment is to them; they take it for granted. Here as elsewhere in the world, a nation preserves the national character of its national home primarily by institutionalizing the use of its language in schools and government. Immigrants to the United States are expected to eventually share the language of the majority and send their children to English-speaking schools. The schools and institutions of Paris are unilingually French, which doesn't stop this city to be infinitely more cosmopolitan than Montréal. The Swiss Confederation considers itself a confederation of nations; there is no phoney one-nation concept, and cultural separation is complete. If a Swiss-German from Zürich moves to Geneva, he must send his children to French schools. Nationalism, in this context, means nothing but a consciousness of unity, among members of a cultural group that is sufficiently strong to seek or possess a national life of its own.

In Ottawa's Canada, nationalism is very much acceptable as long as it remains plain Canadian. It doesn't occur to our English-Canadian friends that if "nationalism" is to be odious, it ought to be so for both sides of the fence, not just when dealing with Québec. It is most abject to discredit French-Canada by throwing the suspicion of fanaticism and nationalism on its legitimate needs. If an immigrant is to have a choice as to the language of instruction for his children in Québec, the same should apply to immigrants outside Québec. However, this policy seems hardly practicable nor would it be tolerated. This choice seems already restricted in the very Province of Québec, when that choice happens to be French. Indeed, the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal inaugurated its first French School only

as recently as 1960.¹⁰ However, non-Catholic immigrants are not permitted to choose French as a language of instruction for their children. A Board rule requires parents applying that their children be already French-speaking. A friend and his wife, immigrants from the United States, went as far as going to see the District Superintendent, Mr. A.D. Talbot. This man simply refused to accept their children into a French Protestant School; "Our English schools would suffer", he explained. There is no doubt that they would. A recent opinion poll showed that 30% of the English Protestants in Montréal would be willing to send their children to unilingual French schools, if the opportunity arose.¹¹ The ludicrous thing about all this happens to be that the Protestant School Board's arbitrariness is not challenged by anyone, whereas the St. Léonard Catholic Board's decision to phase out English schools for Italian immigrants caused more than a few ripples.¹²

What happens to the Protestant children who *do* speak French? Do they get, what is called, a fair shake? Hardly! The Protestant School Board of Greater Montréal represents 25% of the total population, 15% of the various Christian denominations, 10% Jews. French-speaking Protestants and Jews together come close to being 4% of the total population. The School Board takes care today of approximately 64,000 children, at both the primary and secondary levels. Of these, about 7,000 are French-speaking. Only about 1,000 go to unilingual French Schools, all three of them in inconvenient locations, presumably to encourage parents and children alike.

You may add to all this the final insult that graduates from Montréal's English schools (Protestant and Catholic) hardly speak a word of French. Add also the fact that immigration into Québec is not controlled by French-Canadians themselves. Consequently, the immigrant integrates into the segment of the population that invited him and gave him a job. Already 40% of the Montreal population is English-speaking. For the whole of Quebec, where the French constitute still 85% of the total population, the census calculations of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics give considerably less than encouraging figures. The average income of a salaried French-Canadian male in 1961 was topped by immigrants of eleven different nationalities. Only Italians and native Indians earned less. But jobs are only available to good boys; a French-Canadian's nationalist sympathies constitute proof of his "disloyalty to his company". To be politically active as a school commissioner, for instance, may mean dismissal from one's job, as the recent Noranda Mines incident showed. Or consider the letter to the editor by some R. Okkenhaug (*McGill Daily*, Nov. 22, 1965):

I am an immigrant to Canada, not to Quebec. When I apply for Canadian citizenship, I hope to become a Canadian citizen and not a Quebec citizen. . . . Federal politics is no longer attractive to men of ability due to power-hungry local politicians like Mr. Lesage in Quebec who do whatever they can to obstruct federal political processes. . . .

This is still very much the law of the jungle. If you do not happen to possess the correct property titles, papers rubber-stamped through the right diplomatic channels, then your possessions are simply up for grabs, in the name of internationalism. That is how the Indians ceased to be human and the Okkenhaugs were entitled to slaughter them. H.W. Debor, of the right-wing German newspaper *Montrealer Zeitung*, explains (Sept. 9, 1965):

There are no "founding nations" (in Canada)...All these rumours about "two founding nations" are but a big bluff. ... In the province of Manitoba, Louis Riel, a French-Canadian, was the revolutionary opponent of confederation. ... The unquestioned leader of the anti-Riel movement was a German, Dr. Schulz. He didn't let go till he had Riel defeated. ... We have here a German-Canadian heading the movement against French-Canadian special wishes, and he was victorious. ... Not nations, but a handful of energetic men founded Canada. Of these, there are more of German than of French origin. ... (translated by the author)

He goes on to advocate "integration", whatever that is supposed to mean, of the many ethnic groups into one nation, instead of assimilation. He admits however that the world, to date, has not yet brought forth a "multicultural" nation. A more direct view is expressed by one W. Collingsworth (*McGill Daily*, Nov. 22, 1965):

I still don't get why we should join up with the Frenchmen for anything. We don't really need them because our interests are different from theirs. Also, I am against unilingualism. If they want help from us, then they'd better learn to speak the language of the majority in this country. Let's keep the pea-soupers in their proper places, which is where they belong.

Pat Burns, a "hot liner" on one of Montreal's most obnoxious radio stations, suggests that those French-Canadians who resent being plain Canadian would be best sent back to France.

I don't think I have to entertain the question "Why is French-Canada dissatisfied?" any further. So, what does French-Canada want? It wants a "foyer national", a national home with a national life of its own. What would constitute a national home for French-Canadians? That would be a place with a French environment, a place, where a French-Canadian could feel "maître chez lui". His legitimate hopes lie in Quebec, where he constitutes an 85% majority and *possesses* already political institutions of his own. Consequently, the term "Quebec" has replaced progressively "French-Canada" in the minds of most. Two publications have certainly marked this development between 1965 and 1968: Raymond Barbeau's *Le Québec bientôt unilingue* (1965) and René Lévesque's *Option Québec*, both published by the Editions de l'Homme in Montréal.¹³

Yet, something less than expected stirred the minds of the Québec population to a greater extent, quite to the dismay of almost everybody else. The organ of the Communist Party of France, *L'Humanité*, explains (July 25, 1967):¹⁴

Whatever one's liking for the opinions of General de Gaulle, particularly since his arrival in Canada, the vehemence of the reactions he raises in Ottawa, Washington, and London reflects the importance of the crises in Canadian Confederation. ... With the Communists of Canada, we have to recognize the legitimacy of Québec as the national home (état national) of the French-Canadian nation. ... There remains the possibility of a new confederal pact, based on equality, to fight more effectively the imperialism of their neighbors south of the border. ...

International recognition that there *is* a problem has had the result that the average French-Canadian now thinks aloud what he didn't even allow to

animate his dreams before, for fear of loosing his job:¹⁵ There remains the option of self-determination, guaranteed by the U.N. charter, as long *but only as long* as we are a majority in the political framework of the State of Québec.

The above arguments were intended to be an attempt to convince rather than to enlighten. The English-Canadians are the ones who need to be persuaded that a bicultural nation is an impossibility. There must be a good reason why there has never been a bicultural nation throughout history. To have an aggregation of humans, where everybody has to speak the same two languages and therefore has the same two cultures, would amount to generalized cultural schizophrenia, the birth of a schizophrenic nation.

Footnotes

1. Dedicated to the memory of Bill 85.
2. Brief to the Tripartite Commission on University Government (1968). Cohen warns that McGill's Québec involvement may narrow its range, focus, and ultimately its spirit. He recommends intensive links with the rest of Canada and the U. S., to preserve McGill, from contamination presumably. It is therefore curious to see McGill name its new seven million dollar library in honor of Jean-Philippe McLennan. By today's standards, McLennan would be called a "terrorist"; in 1837, he attempted to overthrow English domination through the use of force. This cost him eight years in penitentiary. In his last political manifesto (*Avancez à l'arrière*), he wrote: "Si quelqu'un espère que les deux peuples de notre pays vont se réunir en paix un de ces jours, on peut bien croire qu'il est idiot." (Anybody who thinks that the two nations of our country will unite for good one of these days is an outright idiot.) As an afterthought, we should like to add that the McLennan Library, financed entirely by the Québec Government, is now the largest library in Montréal. In the meantime, the Université de Montréal, with a student body larger than McGill's will have to do with a library half the size of that of McGill's.
3. Mr. Trudeau suggests that a Quebecker's "homeland" ought to be the whole of Canada, since over two million French-Canadians live outside Québec. To carry this sort of reasoning to its logical conclusion would be to annex ourselves to the United States, since a substantially more important number of French-Canadians, over five million for that matter, lives there.
4. This is even true when the religious past is apparently renegated. The atheism of a nation like France is different in kind from atheism in Russia. In the case of France, we may speak of catholic atheism. For instance, it is not by chance that today's practising as much as former catholics retain attitudes to wine and bread which distinguish them from, let's say, protestants. Incidentally, the traditional distribution of catholics and protestants in Europe corresponds roughly to the limits of viniculture.
5. Report to the International Seminar on the Description and Measurement of Bilingualism (Moncton, June 6-14, 1967), sponsored by UNESCO.
6. In other words, where the bilingual by choice only feels a formal conflict, the forced bilingual experiences an emotional one. It just is not anybody's cup of tea to bear cultural schizophrenia. There are many other attributes distinguishing the two types of bilingual individuals. Bilingualism by choice is more often a mark of "distinction" and "education", and more often than not, it translates into a higher standard of living; it "pays off". This is not so in the case of bilingualism by circumstance: the average income, in Québec, of a bilingual person is \$ 4,772, whereas that of a unilingual English-Canadian, also in Québec, is \$ 5,502. These figures are not extracted from a French-Canadian propaganda pamphlet but appeared in the *McGill Daily* (Oct. 22, 1968, p. 5), which in turn had this information from *Maclean's* French edition of that month. Ultimately, the source is one of the B & B Commission's own reports that were thought to be too inflammatory to be fit for publication.
7. This remark should not be interpreted as meaning that I *advocate* violence; I content myself to *explain* it.
8. A very large part of the Charles University's impetus was derived from being treated as a peer among the Central-European universities. Its natural intellectual links, administrative and student patterns of organization were with Leipzig, Heidelberg, Munich etc. It belonged to the great Central-German system of university life, etc.
9. Nor did they name any library at the Charles University in honor of Jan Zizka.

10. The school system in Quebec is divided along confessional lines rather than linguistic ones. The majority of French-Canadians are Catholic and go to French Catholic schools. However, there is a fair number of English Catholic schools as well.
11. A few send their children to French Catholic schools, in which case they have to accept double taxation. There are also a number of private schools in operation.
12. In an interview with Claude-Lyse Gagnon, from the *Nouveau Monde* (April 1968, pp. 7-8; a Jewish monthly published in French), both René Lévesque and Jean-Guy Cardinal (the actual education minister) agree that the choice of the language of instruction for children cannot be left to the immigrant, if the French-Canadian nation is to survive in Québec.
13. As an afterthought again, one would like to add that the latter book, in the few months since its publication, has already sold ten times more copies than the Trudeau book on federalism.
14. I don't wish to go into the complexities of relations between Québec and de Gaulle. Suffice it to refer here to *De Gaulle au Québec, le dossier des quatre journées* (Editions du Jour, 1967,) a documentary which demonstrates, among other things, English-Canada's efforts in the media to belittle de Gaulle's significance to French-Canada's ego.
15. Still, I wouldn't suggest to ask "Are you a separatist?", if you wanted to find out his opinion. The word "separatist" has been taboo for too long. Besides, you might be from the R.C.M.P. Ask him rather whether he thinks that French should have definite priority in Québec, or whether Québec should send its own delegations to international conferences, etc. It is here that you will discover quite a bit of enthusiasm. Needless to say that so-called opinion polls asserting that separatists are an insignificant minority in Québec are meaningless besides being conscious frauds.

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