

THE MEECH CRISIS

Bilingualism foes stand their ground

Not troubled by the way their actions help to fuel unity crisis

By Nancy Wood
TORONTO STAR

The Ontarians who have stomped on the Quebec flag, compared the French language to the AIDS virus and declared their cities and towns English-only are not backing down.

Despite outrage and hurt feelings in Quebec, the anti-bilingualism forces in Ontario say they won't apologize or change their tune.

"If my remarks are getting Quebec angry enough, well, maybe they'll leave and so much the better," says Jock Andrew, who gained notoriety in Quebec for comparing the spread of French in Canada to infection by the AIDS virus.

"Two languages have never worked in any country in the world," said the author of *Bilingual Today, French Tomorrow*.

Mayor Joe Fratesi of Sault Ste. Marie, the first Ontario city to declare itself English-only, yesterday said he remains staunchly opposed to providing French language services for small numbers of francophones.

"We accept that in most places in Quebec, French is the working language. In our community, English is the working language. There is no need for there to be duplication of services."

The move by the Soo council was largely symbolic, since the city has not offered French services in the past and was not under any obligation to start.

But its anti-French resolution, followed by similar motions by another 40 or so municipalities, was held up in Quebec as a symbol of rejection by English Canada.

Also unrepentant are the people who organized an anti-French demonstration in Brockville last fall, when half a dozen or so protesters dragged their feet over the Quebec fleur-de-lis at the local railway station.

Television footage of the event has been played over and over in Quebec, particularly a shot of one man in sunglasses and canvas hat who seems to stomp on the flag with particular passion.

Who were these people? The organizers of that demonstration claim they don't know.

The incident took place last Sept. 6, when Premier David Peterson stepped off his train for a meeting with Liberal MPPs.

A local English-rights group, the Brockville chapter of Alliance Ontario, had organized a protest against the provincial law offering Ontario government service in French in 22 communities around the province.

Alliance president Gordon LeBlanc said he was expecting a handful of supporters at the Brockville station that day and was shocked when about 50 people showed up.

"Where all the others came from, I don't know," the 50-year-old engineer said in an interview from his Brockville home this week.

Others at the event say activists were there from Pembroke, Cornwall and Kingston.

While LeBlanc confronted Peterson, others took out their frustration in another way.

Someone had brought the blue



MULTIPLE IMAGE: Quebecers have been given a steady television diet of scenes of these anti-bilingualism activists stomping on the fleur-de-lis at the Brockville train station.



NOT FORGOTTEN: Those behind the protest that led to the Brockville flag-stomping incident point to a 1988 burning of the Maple Leaf in Montreal by French-language activists.

and white fleur-de-lis. Where did it come from?

"You couldn't buy a fleur-de-lis in Brockville for love or money," former alderman Don Fowler, 64, treasurer of the local Tory riding association, recalled from his Brockville home this week. "I think it was a group of expatriate Quebecers who brought it."

Faye Garner, the former president of the Brockville chapter of the anti-bilingualism Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada, was there.

"I thought it was a fantastic success," she said in an interview.

Is she bothered how Quebec

saw the event? "We're not really concerned about how Quebec took it," she said. "We weren't there to accommodate what they wanted."

The flag-trampling incident started off as an attempted flag-burning, said Garner, a 41-year-old piano teacher.

"Pretty well everybody had left — except for the TV cameras. They were trying to burn it but it didn't want to burn. It wouldn't

take. So they stomped on it instead."

Afterward, the flag did catch fire and was burned.

Did she step on it?

"I don't recall," Garner said.

Fowler says he didn't stomp on the flag, but he wouldn't identify those who did.

"If you identify who was involved they might be targeted," he said. "They were just angry and frustrated, mostly with Premier Peterson who gave them the cold shoulder."

"I thought to myself, 'It's not the thing to do.' But I remember at some event in Montreal, there was the burning of the Canadian flag."

LeBlanc also remembers when the Maple Leaf was torched. It occurred at a political rally in Montreal on Dec. 18, 1988. The Mouvement Quebec Francais had organized a demonstration to protest the Quebec government's plans to allow some English on commercial signs.

Protesters poured lighter fluid on the Maple Leaf and burned it before the cameras.

LeBlanc wants to know why that flag desecration isn't still on the evening news. And why has the Brockville incident been given the play it has by the Canadian media?

"I believe there is some conspiracy within the CBC to blow this out of proportion by playing that three- to five-second piece over and over," LeBlanc said.

But he doesn't criticize the Brockville people who stomped on the flag. "It sends a message to the government that they have a problem."

That problem, according to him, is shown by the same policy that sparked the Montreal flag-burning — the Quebec government's decision to allow severely restricted use of English on interior commercial signs, despite a Supreme Court decision against restrictions.

"It's the same as the Nazis burning the Jews' books," LeBlanc said. "If somebody would have stepped on the Nazi flag in 1939 or 1942, it might have stopped."

How flag desecration fanned separatist flames

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dian gentleman — just as ordinary-looking as the flag-trampler — saying that Canada needs the French language like it needs the AIDS virus.

They've heard the French version of Canada's national anthem being booed at Toronto's SkyDome in full view and hearing of the president of the United States and the Prime Minister of Canada.

And they've seen the municipal council of Sault Ste. Marie voting to ban French services nobody was obliging it to provide in the first place.

They've seen the same scene reenacted at some of the other 50 or so Ontario municipalities where the TV cameras arrived in time to record similar gestures of generosity.

Symbols and myths replacing reality in Meech crisis

Every well-informed person in Quebec knows there's another side to the coin:

□ They know that Toronto and a number of other large cities across Canada have voted in favor of bilingualism.

□ They know that Quebec's French-first language laws, 101 and 178 — however necessary they may be felt to be at home — rile a lot of English Canadians as much as the SkyDome louts rile Quebecers.

□ They know that tens of thousands of English-speaking parents across Canada have placed their children in French immersion classes.

□ But there's a difference between what you know and what you feel.

Sixty-five per cent of Quebecers interviewed in a poll last February said they felt English Canadians were inclined to be "hostile" to Quebecers. Only 25 per cent said they felt English Canadians were well-intentioned towards them.

The same poll, carried out by

the respected Sorecom firm for *l'Actualite* magazine and the TVA television network, was one of a series showing a majority of Quebecers — 54 per cent in this case — in favor of some form of sovereignty if the Meech Lake constitutional accord fails.

The manner in which the Meech deal has turned into a national psycho-drama is itself an illustration of symbols and myths taking over from reality.

The accord started out quietly enough in 1987 as the attempted fulfillment of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's election promise three years earlier to reconcile Quebec "with honor and enthusiasm" with the 1982 Constitution.

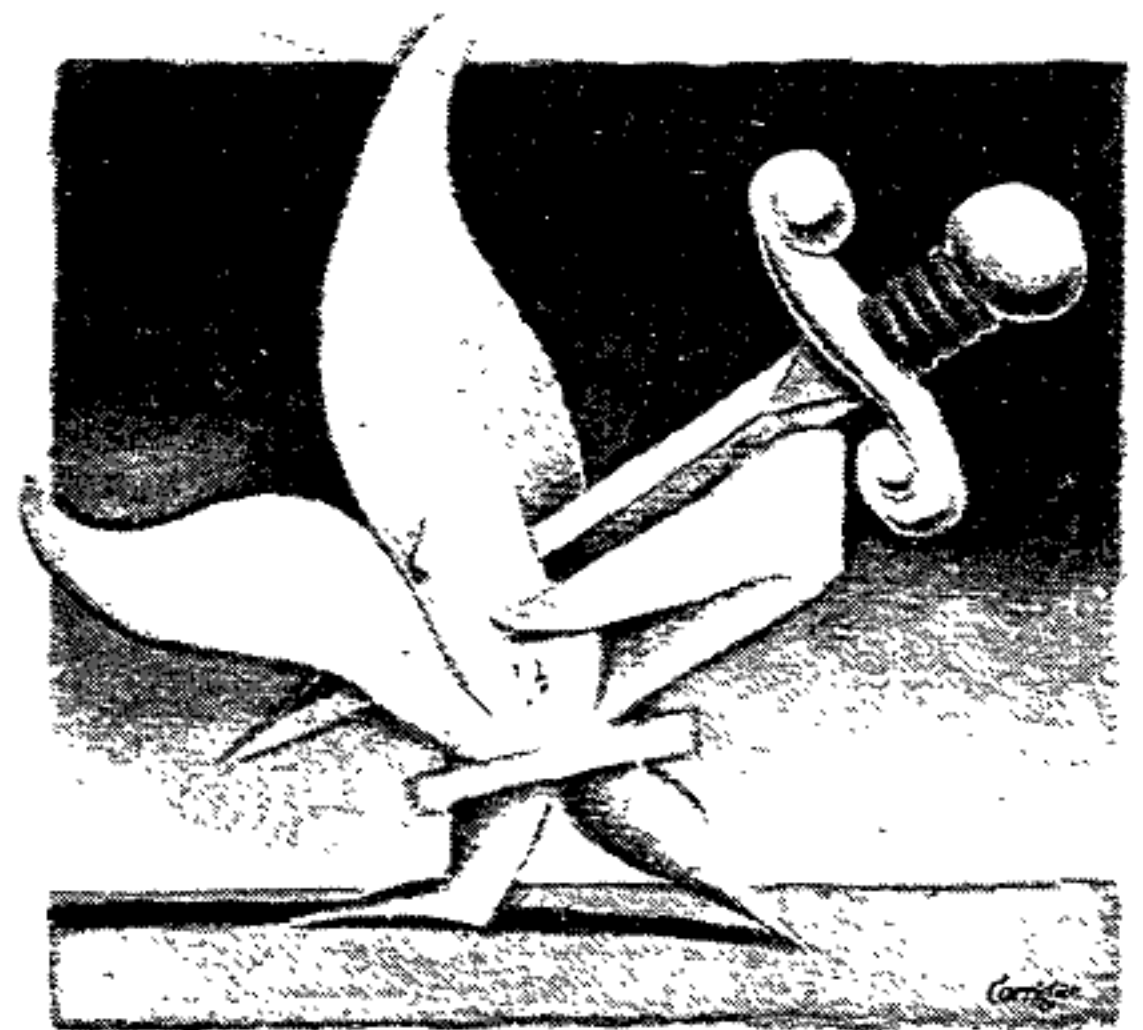
Seen from Quebec, the accord seemed to answer five relatively harmless "minimal demands" put forward by Premier Robert Bourassa's government in order to put some balm on the amendment and patriation of the Constitution, despite Quebec's protests, in 1982 by Ottawa and the nine other provinces.

Even Bourassa and his cabinet lieutenant on constitutional matters, Gil Remillard, never claimed the now-contentious clause recognizing Quebec as a "distinct society" would ever be more than a possible bulwark for strengthening the province's case in future court decisions.

Nationalists expressed fears that the clause, taken with the accord's admission that English Quebecers are a "fundamental characteristic" of the province's makeup, could weaken Quebec in defending its language laws before the courts.

The nuances about Quebec having power to "promote" its identity while the federal government would merely "preserve" Canada's principle of duality looked more like fodder for future generations of overpaid constitutional lawyers than the stuff of revolution.

In this same Quebec perspective, the accord falls far short of demands Bourassa himself was making during his first two terms in office from 1970 to 1976, including complete control over so-



cial programs and telecommunications.

The immigration provisions are seen in Quebec as guaranteeing Ottawa much the same predominant role it exercises under the joint arrangement with Quebec that has been functioning for more than a decade.

Other aspects — such as the possibility for a province to opt out, with compensation, from a shared-cost program in an area of its jurisdiction such as day care, and only if it provided a similar service — at first appeared acceptable enough for Ontario's David Peterson and seven other premiers to sign them and have them ratified by their legislatures.

So did the provincial veto on such future fundamental constitutional changes as Senate reform.

Thus the offensive to derail the Meech accord — launched by New Brunswick Liberal Premier Frank McKenna after he defeated Conservative Richard Hatfield, and by Manitoba Premier Gary

Filion, in reaction to Quebec's Bill 178 on French-only signs in December, 1988 — was tainted with suspicion from the outset in Quebec.

How could a deal approved by the three federal parties, the House of Commons and Senate of Canada, signed by the Prime Minister and the 10 premiers in office in 1987 and ratified by eight legislatures representing 92 per cent of the country's population, be all that bad?

Manitoba and New Brunswick were sensitive provinces to lead the charge. Manitoba because members of its one-time French majority are now pushing up daisies in the cemeteries. And French was reinstated in Manitoba's schools long after it was too late.

And New Brunswick because it still summons up memories of rednecks such as one-time Moncton Mayor Leonard Jones, despite Hatfield's accomplishments for bilingualism.

Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells, seen on French television confidently pronouncing himself for Quebec bilingualism in unabashed unilingual English, was the final straw.

There have been other political and constitutional crises involving Quebec in 20th century Canada:

□ The conscription crises of 1917 and 1942; Maurice Duplessis' showdown over income tax in 1954.

□ The 1970 terrorist and War Measures' Act crisis.

□ The election of the Parti Quebecois in 1976.

□ The 1980 referendum on Quebec sovereignty.

There have also been recurring incidents no more significant but no less emotional than the recent flag-stomping and booing:

□ The insistence on naming a hotel in Montreal after Queen Elizabeth in the late 1950s despite a 250,000-name petition for it to be called Chateau Maisonneuve.

□ The anger over the late CNR president Donald Gordon's early 1960s remark that there were no French-speaking top executives in the national railway because none competent enough could be found.

□ The anger at the federal government for dragging the Queen through Quebec in 1964 as if to show that the separatist movement was insignificant. The ugly clash between police and separatist demonstrators that resulted.

□ The sense of rage and humiliation in 1975-76 when English Canadian pilots and air traffic controllers fought introduction of bilingual air traffic services in Quebec.

The fact that Quebecers could vote simultaneously for former prime minister Pierre Trudeau and the PQ's late Rene Levesque can be explained partly by Trudeau's efforts to roll back this kind of prejudice in English Canada.

and series of symbolic incidents that strike the public imagination — come together in such a telling mix.

Rarely has a crisis been accompanied by such a significant shift in opinion as the calm acceptance by Quebec's newly confident business elite of the possibility of some form of sovereign status for the province.

Seldom has a crisis thrown up as dramatic a figure as former environment minister Lucien Bouchard, who resigned over Meech this week, to act as a potential flashpoint for the unfolding events.

Nor have past tensions often coincided with the emergence of a life-and-death cultural debate such as the one just starting over the influence of non-French-speaking students in French schools, and the fear that they will anglicize a whole new generation of French Quebecers from within their own school system.

Quebec's massive shift in public opinion occurs with eerie calm

Not all the major changes in modern Quebec have taken a spectacular public form.

In less than 10 years, in the 1960s, the Roman Catholic church slipped almost imperceptibly from an all-pervasive force to an extremely modest role as cultural and religious backdrop to Quebec society.

This could be the way in 1990 too.

A massive shift in public opinion is taking place but it's happening with an eerie calm.

Most of the images of nervousness, panic and crisis are coming from English Canada.

If Meech fails, it seems clear Quebecers won't turn the other cheek. They could simply turn away from Canadian federalism, as we now know it, as quietly as they turned away from the religion of their ancestors.