DIVERSITY, INTEGRATION AND BELONGING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUR SCHOOLS, OUR COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Are we English-speaking Quebecers the second of two solitudes or a *partenaire a part entière* in the future of this province? The following essay offers a personal exploration on how Quebec's linguistic minority and, particularly, its school network, is answering that question. In the distinct and evolving context of Quebec and its ever-present concern about the survival and strength of the French language, how is the English-speaking minority finding its place? How is it responding to the demands of diversity in its schools? Is this a source of conflict or hope for our future cohabitation in Quebec? Perhaps, a little of both.

Are we English-speaking Quebecers the second of two solitudes or a *partenaire à part entière* in the future of this province? That existential question—and the spectrum of potential answers to it—perhaps best situates the daily reality of the English-speaking community of Quebec. Hugh MacLennan's classic might be approaching its 70th anniversary but there are still vestiges of English and French Quebecers living in parallel and sometimes clashing universes. At the same time, compelling examples abound of a real and inclusive partnership, a full partnership, in our communities, in our schools.

How does this daily dichotomy play out? How do the mutual responses of English- and French-speaking Quebecers to diversity help decide how far we've progressed on this spectrum? I'm pleased to have been invited to offer some general impressions on the matter as it pertains to Quebec's schools, necessarily shaped by my job experience but offered humbly as purely personal reflections. My credentials for pronouncing on the subject? Gérald Leblanc, a passionate and provocative nationalist commentator who used to write in *La Presse*, once coined a description of the "evil troika" of anglophone Quebec. Its members, according to Leblanc, were Alliance Quebec, The Gazette and the former Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. Leblanc might have added a fourth, the Quebec English School Boards Association, which is the public voice of the nine elected English school boards across the province. I happen to be the only individual to have worked for all three points on this axis of evil. I now serve as Executive Director of the presumptive fourth.

We English-speaking Quebecers can hardly help but be confronted regularly with questions about who we are, how we fit in and where we want to go. Sometimes, there

are comforting answers, sometimes less so. I only offer the above personal background to show that, over the years, I have been lucky enough to get paid to consider the questions and the answers. That doesn't mean I have come up with better ones, just that it's been a little harder for me to ignore the subject!

The editors of this magazine invited contributing writers to think about English-speaking Quebec and **"diversity"**, **"integration"** and **"belonging"**. Those subjects are probably tougher to evaluate than reading, writing and 'rithmetic but they are important measures of our progress and our place here…of the future health and vitality of our English school network and our English-speaking community across Quebec.

First, our collective response to **diversity**, I think, says something important about who we are as a community; second, our ability to **integrate** into Quebec's francophone majority will surely help determine our future health and vitality; third, our joint sense of **belonging** should give us a credible reading on our continued level of interest in actually being a partenaire à part entière in Quebec's future.

Diversity: Quebec's English public school network brings together a dispersed and varied population of some 110,000 students. It is a portrait of diversity. In fact, the primary shared characteristic of our students is probably a government-issued certificate of eligiblity to English schooling. Other than that, our students come from many cultures, speak English but often another language—increasingly French—at home and generally flout any remaining Quebec stereotypes about WASPS, wealth and privilege. About three-quarters of them live in Montreal and surrounding communities, where they and their families participate in a daily melding of nationalities and practices. It has always been thus, even more so for the generations of students who preceded the adoption of the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101) in 1977.

There were over a quarter-million students in English schools then, when no certificate of eligibility was required and many newcomers to Quebec chose English schooling for their children. That has all changed now but the general practice of embracing diversity as a defining characteristic of our English school system has not. As Quebec has evolved, its English-speaking community has been bound by an elastic and largely unstated self-description. That stands us in contrast to our francophone *concitoyens*, whose penchant for self-assessment and analysis seems to know no bounds. We can understand it but our own daily diet doesn't depend upon those kinds of calories.

Our schools, students and staff have no particular immunity to intolerance, no antidote for prejudice or jealousy. Human nature includes those unfortunate tendencies, and they have had their ample place in Quebec's reasonable accommodation debate. There is a key difference, however: for us non-francophone Quebecers, it is so much easier to look at the concept of diversity as a positive challenge rather than a potential threat. The English language is not in any danger; the French language is, or is, at least, often seen to be. Some of us English-speaking Quebecers are more acutely affected by and aware of our status as a minority in Quebec. Others negotiate their lives in school and beyond without much thought paid to the demo-linguistic dance that is always centre-stage in Quebec. Either way, what does collectively distinguish us from Quebec's francophone majority is that we are largely spectators in the tug of war that is often portrayed as pitting shared Quebec values and traditions against those expressed by its increasing cultural diversity. While most of us understand and empathize with the preoccupation of protecting the French language and culture in Quebec, let's face it, a visceral connection to that cause doesn't really occur unless one is, in fact, French-speaking.

The often-messy psychodrama over reasonable accommodation is not really our fight. Sure, there have been points of friction in English schools about who gets off for which religious holidays, positions staked out on the wearing of the kirpan in school, or requested exemptions from co-ed gym classes. But, for English-speaking Quebecers, those points don't get sharpened into battles between defending Quebec's common French language and granting accommodations for cultural and religious particularities. Generally, the conflicts get settled in English schools, through voluntary and mutual adjustments, negotiated by school principals and parents, staff and students.

The Courts have provided some jurisprudence and successive governments have drawn up guidelines and protocols. In the end, our schools have found ways to adapt. Yes, addressing diversity can be a challenge, but one that fits into the English-speaking Quebec reality without calling its core into question. The diversity is part of that core, not in opposition to it.

I would suggest that this different perspective colors our distinct approach to issues of diversity, which are inevitably shaded with layers of political and social meaning in Quebec. Two recent examples: Quebec's *Ministère de l'Éducation*, du Loisir et du Sports published a regulation last winter proposing to allow some widened flexibility in the scheduling of the school day. Clumsily, the Minister initially neglected to note publicly that this change was at least partly instigated by a need to render legal the operation of a small number of Hasidic Jewish private schools, the change allowing them to add school hours on Sunday to complete the prescribed Quebec

curriculum. The entirely predictable reaction: collective outrage in French Quebec about an "accomodement déraisonnable"—and general bemusement in English-speaking Quebec. For most in our community who looked a little closer, this solution seemed a fairly reasonable, if poorly-choreographed compromise.

The second example offers a reminder, I think, that our community's home address is right here and that is where we want it to be. We are not just anglo-Canadians who happen to live in the province: When Vancouver's Olympics open with an otherwise majestic ceremony that gives a back-of-the-hand to Quebec and French Canada, the English-speaking Quebecers I know are angry, insulted and disappointed. It's a missed opportunity to show that Quebec belongs. On this point, we are in full solidarity with French Quebec. While I can't offer any empirical evidence in these two examples, I do think they paint a picture of our community's collective approach to diversity in the Quebec context.

Integration. Studies persistently show our English-speaking minority, particularly our children, making exponential progress. Growing numbers of English students are writing and succeeding on French mother-tongue exams at the end of high school. Preparing our kids for a future in Quebec is at the heart of every English school board's mission statement. While it is an impediment to the future health of an English school network in Quebec, some 13,000 students who are eligible for English schooling are now registered in French schools. The minority-language community of Quebec has learned the drill: mastering French is not an advantage, it's simply essential.

Belonging. It's not a perfect equation but when the volume of sovereignist rhetoric goes up, the collective comfort level of English-speaking Quebecers goes down. Polls and anecdotes about our intentions continue to indicate that up to a third of us suggest we won't be in Quebec in five years. Actions speak louder, of course, and the numbers leaving never come close to matching those intentions. Still, a headline about an anglo merchant visited by a language inspector with a measuring tape, a trial balloon about barring English CEGEPs to new Quebecers... and the delicate balance between belonging and ambivalence becomes once again more uncertain.

Ultimately, that uncertainty is entirely tolerable. Most of us would probably say it's just part of the contract if you live here. Like horns honking in New York, fog hanging in London, it can be irritating but uncertainty is hardly life-threatening. We've all heard that intolerant epithet thrown at minorities of any color, religion or language: "If you don't like it here, why don't you go somewhere else!" The fact is, most of us could. But, we don't want to.