THE "A" WORD: THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING AN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE HERITAGE NETWORK IN MULTICULTURAL QUEBEC

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ABSTRACT

Reflections on the term "Anglophone" and its problematic use in defining communities in Quebec in the light of one organization's attempts to promote an awareness of English-speaking heritage, with emphasis on one model for proceding forward through these murky waters.

In 2000, when the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network held its Inaugural meeting on the weekend of la Fête Nationale, it sent a curious message to potential attendees. With the importance of that specific weekend with in mainstream Quebec culture, it appeared as though this was a new Anglo-rights group thumbing their noses at Quebec's linguistic majority. Combined with the term "heritage," which can push some uncomfortable buttons (i.e., Christian Heritage), "Anglophone" seemed to suggest exclusion. My own perspective was shaped by academia, specifically the McGill History Department and the Montreal History Group, which tended to pursue integration with mainstream Francophone Quebec rather than isolation. "Anglophone" seemed almost a dirty word—so why would a nascent community organization, even with the best of intentions, use it?

It turned out that the June 24th weekend had been the only one available to the planners of the founding meeting. It also turned out that the event was a gathering of people interested in local history who had the English language in common. English was not even necessarily their first language: of the eight elected to serve on QAHN's first board of directors, two were Francophone.

QAHN's origins lay within the Fédération des sociétés d'histoire du Québec, a province-wide network of historical societies, small museums and archives to which a great many groups in English-speaking areas belong, even though its leadership is overwhelmingly Francophone and its business is conducted almost entirely in French. In the Eastern Townships, however, the number of English-speaking member groups is sufficiently large for

regular meetings to be held in English. In the latter part of 1999, it occurred to the members of the FSHQ's Eastern Townships "chapter" that this model could be applied to the entire province and that a parallel network of English-speaking societies would be a useful way to share wisdom and compare experiences within the overarching context of living in a Francophone society.

Research revealed that such a network would be eligible for funding from the federal Department of Canadian Heritage (PCH) under its Official Languages Support Programs: as an organization serving the province's linguistic minority—English speakers, that is—it could join the ranks of the Townshippers' Association, the Outaouais Alliance (now Regional Association of West Quebecers), the Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations, the Quebec Community Newspapers Association, and more than a dozen others. Organizers formed a steering committee and applied for a start-up grant from PCH to hold an exploratory conference. Once it was voted into existence with by-laws, mission statement and board of directors, the network could apply for core funding to hire a permanent coordinator as well as project funding with which to take on special activities. As an official player for the province's linguistic minority community, however, the organization was expected to have "Anglophone" displayed in its name.

The three-day conference during which QAHN was founded ("Building a Future for Our Past") took place at Bishop's University in Lennoxville.[1] It drew over 130 people from the Townships, Quebec City, the Gaspé, the Lower North Shore, the Laurentians, the Chateauguay Valley, the Saguenay, the Outaouais, and Montreal—and from many different fields, including journalists, archivists, and professional historians like me. My earlier qualms were dispelled in the company of dozens of highly knowledgeable and enthusiastic individuals who studied and wrote about history by choice (if only students showed half the initiative!) and I agreed to sit on the board of directors as the "education" representative, to liaise with academia and the school system. Had I known then that, three years later, I would find myself elected QAHN president, I might have been more wary, but those are the paths along which we are led in life.

The other non-regional seat on the QAHN board was entitled "cultural." It created some problems—and still does. The idea was to ensure that at least one member of the board came from what is often referred to as the "cultural communities"—someone not necessarily from a visible minority but at least from outside the "anglais de souche" cohort of British ancestry. There was, and is, something disagreeable about this frank tokenism, but it was clear that the creators of QAHN understood that cultural diversity was a reality in Quebec. Moreover, they seem to have anticipated that the network would come across all too readily as an Old Anglo institution and would need to counter this perception by means of a procedural requirement. Indeed, one respect in which the Lennoxville gathering was not particularly diverse was ethnicity: apart from a sprinkling of French and Germanic names, the attendance list was largely British in origin. The first person to occupy the "cultural" seat represented the Channel Islands association—arguably a deviation from the spirit in which the seat was conceived. Whether or not it made sense for one person to liaise with all the province's cultural communities was another matter again—and one that QAHN has never entirely managed to resolve.

Well-intended efforts to respect the cultural diversity of Quebec society soon proved to be way out of their depth when it came to Montreal. QAHN's base was the Townships, its member groups overwhelmingly rural—or, to use that peculiar term born of Montreal myopia, "off island." In the city, historical societies are much fewer in number, and only a handful represent English-speaking communities. Heritage is of considerable interest—witness the ongoing success of Heritage Montreal—but the nature of urban life rarely permits people to establish the kind of bond with their neighbourhood's past that is possible in small towns. Besides, there are plenty of other institutions that do not require heavy volunteer labour, including world-class museums, archives, and libraries. And ethnic distinctiveness takes a pronounced turn when organizations for national or religious groups are focused on their *own* heritage, in the time-honoured tradition of Montreal "national" societies such as the St George's, St Andrew's, St Patrick's, Hebrew Benevolent, and St Jean-Baptiste.

Where did all this leave Anglophone heritage? Advancing the cause of QAHN on the urban front has involved two obstacles: one political, the other social or cultural.

The political issue is, of course, about language. Away from Montreal, Anglophones are used to living in French almost all the time, at least outside of the home. Individually or collectively, Anglophones pose no threat. An organization dedicated to promoting "Anglophone" heritage is similarly non-threatening, since digging up relics of a more influential past has no bearing on a politically impotent present. Furthermore, much of the Francophone majority is genuinely interested in the Anglo aspects of Quebec's history, and a great many recognize significant Anglo elements in their own pasts—witness the Irish ancestry of several of our premiers. In its early years, QAHN met with a great deal of support from the PQ government, as it has done with their Liberal successor, even to the tune of providing modest core

funding annually. Anglophone heritage is a small but important component of a modern, culturally diverse Quebec society.

The rules are different in Montreal, however. In the city, there are more Anglophones. There is certainly more English; some even claim it is more predominant than French. It is certainly true that there are Anglophone institutions that Off Island people have no access to, including places to buy English books and see English films. Many Montreal Anglophones still live much of their lives in English, although many more are functionally bilingual than was the case a generation or two ago. As a result, they seem, at least in some circles, a threat. The notion of Anglophone heritage could strike sinister overtones, containing as it might seem to do the intention to revive the glory days of Anglophone cultural superiority and to reopen the wounds inflicted in the course of language rights battles.

Surprisingly, those who tend to see "Anglophone" as a threat are likely to be Anglophones themselves. One train of thought says that linguistic peace is a delicate thing, and any attempt to assert an Anglophone identity is like waving a red flag. Another tendency—prevalent in, but by no means restricted to, academia—is to find "Anglophone" distinctly uncool. Disdain for English-rights zealots appears to have been adopted like a fashion, and the Anglophone brand is clearly out. The recent denial by Quebec's Justice Minister that she was Anglophone came as a rude surprise to many who had applauded her appointment to that office. Kathleen Weil's vacillation was typically Montreal, however: if spending much of one's time in French and having French friends means one is not an Anglophone, then most Off Island Anglophones wouldn't be Anglophones either. On one occasion I used the "A" word in conversation with an academic well-versed in the nuances of language politics and she surprised me by saying: "Oh, I don't like the sound of that! It makes me feel like I'm back in the late seventies." After much discussion, I suggested that her attitude might in part reflect snobbery: she recoiled from "Anglophones" the way she recoiled from people who say they don't know much about art but know what they like. In the end, she admitted I might be right. Even so, Anglo denial (is it in part Anglo guilt?) puts paid to any idea, however rational it might be, that "Anglophone" is essentially the same as "English-speaking," simply another in a list of Gallicisms we have adopted. It isn't—and to avoid the baggage many groups have dropped the word and use "English-speaking" religiously, and the "ESC" to designate the community, even though there are plenty of Francophones who consider themselves English-speaking.

If one tries to extend the definition of Francophone and Anglophone to people whose mother tongue is neither, or even to people whose parents or grandparents spoke a third language, one often meets stiff resistance. I first experienced this while involved in the Heritage Task Force of the Global Development Plan as it brought its community consultation to downtown Montreal in 2004.[2] The GDP, an initiative of the Quebec Community Groups Network, the umbrella organization linking minority language community groups such as QAHN, sought to establish a vision for the future of the ESC. As a child of the federal government, the GDP took for granted the federal definition of Anglophone and Francophone, which is that everyone fits into one or the other camp, according to which of Canada's two official languages is your first, or which of them (if your first language is something else) you speak more easily. Quebec, of course, has a third category, unofficially known as Allophone—a convenient fiction that draws a line between people of British ancestry ("Anglophones") and those of other backgrounds whose English is usually flawless but whose parents may speak it with an accent. While the federal definition is also, in its way, a fiction, it keeps ethnicity out of the reckoning.

The social or cultural obstacle that "Anglophone" encounters in Montreal is a product of the Quebec definition. A great many who attended the GDP's downtown consultation stated quite firmly that they were not Anglophone. The assumption was that they were not Old Anglo with origins in Britain, but rather Italian or Greek or Jamaican. QAHN experienced similar reactions when it approached some Jewish groups who said they did not see themselves within Anglophone heritage—and this despite the fact that until the end of the nineteenth century the city's Jews came largely from Britain, sometimes by way of the United States, and that even after that time most Jews strove for familiarity with English rather than French. Even more frustrating for QAHN was the hesitation to embrace Anglophone heritage shown by some of Irish background on the grounds that they did not identify with England. Again, this attitude was an urban phenomenon —and one that would have to be countered if QAHN would ever make inroads in Montreal.

QAHN's first step was to adjust its mission and vision statements so they reflected what the organization really promoted: the history of people in Quebec who at one time spoke or identified primarily with the English language. As asserted by countless Francophones, including two of QAHN's board members, one does not lose interest in one's past simply because part of it spoke English. There may be a tendency in some circles to overlook what is often condescendingly called the Anglophone contribution to Quebec society, and for that reason QAHN's mandate to promote an awareness of Anglophone heritage is useful.

The second step was to approach multicultural Montreal more systematically, by means of an outreach project. In the fall of 2006, QAHN obtained PCH funding to hire a coordinator, Carolyn Shaffer, who had experience working with antagonistic cultural groups, notably Jews and Muslims. Shaffer went to work across the city, officially gathering stories for QAHN's quarterly magazine, the Quebec Heritage News (which deliberately sports no "Anglophone" in its title), and unofficially building useful relationships. She also recruited speakers for a spring symposium that would explore the city's historic diversity with English as a common denominator. QAHN secured the McCord Museum as a venue—but not without considerable discussion and reassurance that the event would not be exclusive (read Anglophone) in any way, nor even officially unilingual. In fact, "Anglophone" was pointedly not mentioned in the conference material, other than by way of reinforcing the idea that the term referred to the heritage of English speakers.

The crowd that gathered at the McCord on April 1st, 2007 for "Montreal Mosaic: A Symposium and Cultural Fair" paid very little attention to whether they were Anglophone, Francophone or Allophone.[3] They told stories. They found they had much in common, despite many different backgrounds, including Irish, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, Greek, Jamaican, and Inuit. Proceedings unfolded in English, with the occasional French intervention, although the initial welcome came in both languages, as well as Spanish, German and Italian—the latter from the keynote speaker, the Honourable Marlene Jennings, who speaks it with her in-laws. At one point, writer Stan Asher was recounting his experiences as a young man working on the factory floor with Percy Rodriguez, who would go on to be a successful Hollywood actor; Jennings rose in delight to announce that Rodriguez had been her godfather. By the end of the day, Montreal's vast mosaic seemed a good deal more intimate, the pieces of the puzzle infinitely more in focus.

It is my conviction that the Montreal Mosaic approach is the way forward, not only for a group like QAHN but for all of Quebec society. Since that day at the McCord, the Bouchard-Taylor hearings have revealed a Quebec highly unsure of its own identity, wanting to be a people with a strong sense of their past and at the same time an open, ethnically diverse society. What we heard from the commission was at times unsettling, but still highly useful; debate and discussion are crucial to resolving differences, even if the process seems extraordinarily slow. What QAHN heard at Montreal Mosaic was proof that wonders can happen if you stop putting people in boxes and just let them talk.

NOTES

[1] *Building a Future for Our Past: Report of the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network's First Annual Conference.* Edited by Louise Abbott. Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network, 2001.

[2] The GDP was later renamed the CDP, the C for the less ambitious "community." *Community Development Plan for the English-Speaking Communities of Quebec, 2005-2010.* Quebec Community Groups Network, 2005.

[3] *Montreal Mosaic: Sketches in a Multicultural History.* Prepared by Sylvia Welke for the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network, 2007.