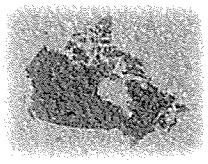
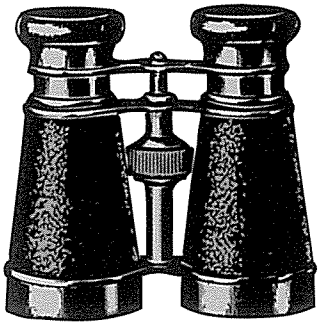
The Past, Present and Future: An Anglophone and Francophone Perspective

The following article is offered as a commentary on the book As I Recall/ Si je me souviens (Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1999). Professor Meisel was co-editor of this anthology of thirty-four events marking the history of French-English relations in Canada.



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The case studies in As I Recall/ Si je me souviens have left me with the impression that it is amazing that Canada should have survived as a viable state in the face of pretty horrendous odds. The tenacity Canadians have displayed in surmounting the seemingly endless challenges to the viability of their state bespeaks of Canadians having had an abiding sense that staying together brought very considerable benefits – benefits that outweighed almost Job-like blows and irritations. One relevant factor was the knowledge that a divorce would be difficult, costly, painful and possibly dangerous. But the principal element in the country's endurance is the presence, at all times, of a critical mass of individuals willing to nurse and husband the union through thick and thin.



These people of goodwill, as we might call them, were equally plentiful on both sides of the linguistic divide. Each was sorely tried over and over again, but both produced wave after wave of believers who sought to mend, patch, and do whatever was needed to preserve the union. More often than not, these saviours were politicians or officials, but by no means always. It was, and is, what we now call the civic culture which prevented this seeming house of cards from being swept off the table by countless gusts of ill wind.

Although tiredness is evident on both sides from time to time, and a disposition to throw in the towel seems tempting, if that is not mixing the metaphor intolerably, we have persisted in our mulish efforts to preserve Canada and to live in a perpetual state of uncertainty.

As the case studies show, the burden has historically been heavier on the shoulders of Francophone Canadians. But they can find comfort in the fact that the disparity in effort and sacrifice between the two groups is constantly diminishing. Although there still is a difference, and so-called (and misnamed) Anglo-Canadians need to mount vigorous efforts to make the country equally hospitable to all, the vigour, health and prosperity of Francophones in Canada has never been as impressive and gratifying as now.

Although the focus in the anatomies explored in the case studies was always on the linguistic or ethnic protagonists, the importance of "externalities" provides a persistent theme throughout the book. By externalities I mean conditions and circumstances surrounding ethnic strife which are not directly linked to it. Press coverage, activities of voluntary associations, economic interests are examples of these extraneous factors impinging on interethnic contacts and their consequences. The lesson to be drawn from this is that, in a country like Canada, virtually all activities and institutions affect the way in which the composing populations co-exist. Consequently, those interested in the survival of Canada must always bear in mind that even developments which seem quite distant from inter-group relations often have profound effects on them. National survival requires that even decisions remote from Anglo-French relations may affect the latter and must, therefore, be considered in the light of national unity.

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A number of these "externalities" are undergoing substantial change and therefore create a context for the great Canadian co-habitation story different from that painted in As I Recall/Si je me souviens bien. None of these changes is as critical as the metamorphosis of the party system.

For virtually all of the country's history all national parties sought to appeal for votes to the whole country. This led them to present platforms, candidates and leaders bridging sectional and ethnic differences by being acceptable to the whole country. In the

nineteen nineties this changed dramatically. The advent on the scene, and their respective appeal in well defined and limited parts of the country, of the Bloc Québecois and the Reform Party catapulted onto the national scene parties with no interest to mediate between the two linguistic communities. Federal parties therefore which, as the book notes, played so critical a part in fashioning national compromises, no longer perform this role, although the Liberals try, with decreasing success: their contingent in the House of Commons looks as if they had become the Ontario party. As the result of these changes, compensating mechanisms will have to be created, filling the now leaking shoes previously occupied by the old parties.

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Social security programs, largely championed and financed by the federal government, have also been important elements in the national glue. Brutal cutbacks by Ottawa and similar reductions in expenditures, sometimes matched by Thatcherite beliefs and policies of provincial governments, have in the dying years of the century seriously weakened the nation-building effects of a caring and mutually supportive Canadian welfare regime. Although efforts are now being made to restore some of the features of the tattered security blanket, the provinces are much more involved than previously and thus the symbolic and substantive aspects of a panCanadian system no longer contribute in anything like the previous force, to the sense of national belonging felt by many Canadians. This lacuna too must be filled, if we are to continue funding satisfaction in being Canadians.

Globalization, the evolution of transnational bodies limiting the powers of individual states, (e.g the WTO, or the IMF), agreements like the FTA and NAFTA, and the mushrooming of colossal private transnational corporations all combine to reduce the power and influence of national governments. At the same time more local, regional or provincial bodies are occupying increasingly important space in the lives and hearts of Canadians. This shift further reduces the institutions which mediate between regions and ethnic communities.

As I Recall/Si je me souviens bien makes clear, as I have already noted, that Francophones have to some extent got the somewhat shorter end of the Canadian stick. This is not surprising, given the respective size of the two principal language groups in Canada, the historical evolution of the country, and the ever more predominant position of English in the world. At the same time, as I also observed above, the relative position of the French language, and of Francophones[1] in the public and private affairs of the country have been improving consistently and is stronger than ever before, asymptotically approaching that of the Anglophones. This notwithstanding, determined efforts are needed to do even better. And the major burden here must be borne by Anglophones or "the rest of Canada" (ROC).

Neither time, space, nor the nature of the present setting permit the development of the theme here. I have in part addressed it in my contributions to the book. Deriving virtue from necessity, I shall identify only one, but a primordially important aspect of the challenge. By standing alone, it will attract the attention it deserves.

English Canada, and particularly most of the provincial governments, has refused to acknowledge that the only realistic and viable form of Canadian federalism is asymmetrical federalism, a system that is, in which many provinces occupy a unique position in the federation, different from that of the other provinces. The ever wise Howard Pawley – no novice in this domain and hardly an overly zealous centralist – referred to this matter during our discussions. Anyone with even an elementary knowledge of the history of this country and with its day-to-day functioning knows that from the very beginning, the various colonies gaining accession to Canada did so on the basis of particular arrangements applying only to themselves and not applied universally to all. And ever since, as our constitutional and operating principles evolved, we have continued to adjust the prevailing arrangements to the status quo in different regions and in the nation as a whole.

Under these conditions, the blind and mean-spirited insistence that Quebec is not a distinct society (whatever adjective one may wish to bestow on it), which consequently can expect to enter into distinct relationships with the rest, is nothing short of an ignorant or willful denial of reality. This unique status is, of course, applicable to a greater or lesser degree to all provinces.

Consequently, one element required of Canadians under the new conditions sketched above, is for ROC to remove its blinkers and be prepared to face reality, rather than perpetuate misleading and outworn self-delusions. Asymmetrical federalism is the only way. ■

[1] I refer only to those living in Quebec and nearby.