# CHANGING ADVOCACY DURING THE *HISTORY OF THE GAZETTE*

**ABSTRACT**

Andrew Phillips presents the changes in *The Gazette's* stance and advocacy as well as in its readership during the tumultuous events of some of its long history.

Intervention presented at the symposium
*The Medium and the Message: Official Language Minorities and Community Vitality and Media and Ethnic Diversity in Canada*
Association for Canadian Studies
Montreal, March 16-17, 2006

For almost 228 years, *The Gazette* has been a mirror of Montreal society, for both better and worse. In the modern era – and by modern I mean since I first stepped foot in the office as a very young reporter in 1974 – the existential question for *The Gazette* has been: for whom do we speak?

It was still pretty clear in 1974. The traditional English-speaking, "anglophone" population of Montreal and Quebec was still big and self-confident. *The Gazette* and the old *Montreal Star* covered the city in a rather anglo-centric way. We had old-style, west-end columnists like Tim Burke and Ted Blackman, and the *Star* had Red Fisher covering the Canadiens (of course, we still have Red Fisher so not everything has changed!). The younger reporters at *The Gazette* used to joke that the editors sent us out into "Quebec", a bit like native scouts whose task was to explore this exotic and not well known country that started at Granby, or event at St-Denis Street.

But the world was changing fast: the FLQ crisis, language tensions, Bill 22, the election of the first PQ government, then Bill 101. It seemed like everything was changing for English Quebecers. Soon *The Gazette*, as the last surviving major English daily in the province, was caught between two forces. On one side, we had the francophone nationalists that called *The Gazette* the "*journal de combat*" for the anglophones and the federalist camp. On the other side were English Quebecers who quite often blamed the paper for failing to be hard-line enough in its defense of "us", "the community." I worked outside Quebec for quite a number of years. I missed Montreal a lot, but I sometimes give thanks that I did not occupy my current position in the mid- and late 1990s. I hardly need to remind this audience how strong feelings were running during and after the last referendum on sovereignty.

It was the era of the so-called "angryphones", of Bill Johnson and Howard Galganov. For them and their followers, *The Gazette* was a large and convenient target on which to exercise their frustrations. It is astonishing to me when I look back at *The Gazette* of 1995 and 1996 how much abuse the former editor, Joan Fraser, now Senator Fraser, had to endure in the pages of her own newspaper. At that time, Bill Johnson had a column in *The Gazette* and regularly attacked the paper and the editor for being part of what he and some others called the "lamb lobby," the supposed appeasers of nationalism. And not just *The Gazette*. According to this faction, pretty much all the English media were a bunch of sell-outs. If only *The Gazette* would issue a clarion call to arms, the English population would rise up, supposedly, and put an end to all the nonsense.

**ANDREW PHILLIPS** is Editor-in-Chief of the Montreal *Gazette*.

This was a difficult issue for *The Gazette* for quite some time. By definition, mainstream papers like ours try to be inclusive. We try to keep on good terms with as many parts of the community as possible, consistent with our central mission of giving people the information they need and telling truths that need to be told. And frankly, with all the pressures on newspapers these days, it is simply bad business to drive people away.

I think it is bad politics, too. *The Gazette*, like most other Anglo institutions in Quebec, has tried over the years to defend the interests of our core constituency, while at the same time building bridges to francophone Quebec. But what does it mean to defend the interests of English-speaking Quebecers? We all know they are not a single bloc. There are different ethnic backgrounds, skin colors, social interests and, of course, political opinions among English Quebecers.

The newspaper has campaigned against the excesses of the language laws, for wider access to English schools, and most of all, for the unity of Canada and against sovereignty. But we have tried to do this in a way that does not alienate moderate francophones. This did not satisfy the hardline angryphones, but I think that the passage of time has borne out the wisdom of this approach.

*The Gazette* itself has certainly changed along with Quebec and the English community. There has been a concerted attempt under several editors and publishers to make the paper more open to all of Montreal, and Quebec. Our coverage of education, municipal affairs, music, theatre and many other areas is more reflective of the reality around us. This is not an attempt to flatter francophones or to seek readers amongst bilingual francophones to replace the lost anglophone readers.

The share of *The Gazette's* readership that is mother-tongue French has been quite stable for many years at between 15 and 20 per cent. It is unlikely that we can increase that by much, given the number and high quality of the French-language dailies. We certainly want to be a newspaper for anyone who is comfortable reading news in English, regardless of their mother tongue or ethnic heritage. However, our drive to be a more inclusive newspaper comes from a desire to better serve all our readers, including our core anglo audience. This is because of the fact that the anglophone community has changed a great deal. The majority of anglophones, especially youth, are much more comfortable with the political and linguistic realities of Quebec. I don't think they want the old NDG-and-Pointe-Claire *Gazette* – and I call it that with the greatest respect and affection for both NDG and Pointe-Claire. They want to know something about music and theatre in French, and what's being talked about on 'Tout le monde en parle'. If we had followed the advice of the Galganovs of the world, I fear that we would have had as little success as they did, and our future would be even more challenging than it already is.

I think I will end here. I do want to say that I am very struck by the findings that were the *point de départ* of this conference. As Jack Jedwab pointed out earlier, Quebec anglophones express more confidence in their media than they do in other institutions. Given the skepticism about media that is so evident elsewhere, this is very encouraging for us, but we know it also places upon us a special responsibility.