THE EVOLUTION OF *THE GAZETTE* AS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITY NEWSPAPER

ABSTRACT

John Kalbfleisch offers episodes from the long history of *The Gazette* to shed light on how it served its readership over the years and where it stands as a minority newspaper today. He describes the changing outlooks of the newspaper during its long history.

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This won't be a comprehensive survey of *The* Gazette as a minority-language newspaper in the years leading up to the advent of the Parti Québécois. *The Gazette* is 228 years old, and such detail would take far longer than the 15 minutes I've been allotted. Instead, I'll offer five or six episodes from its long history that I hope will shed light on where it stands as a minority newspaper today.

I think it was Camille Laurin who said, some time around the time of the White Paper preceding Bill 101, that Quebec anglophones needed to give up their superior airs and start acting like members of the minority they really were. However impertinent anglophones thought Laurin's remark, he was surely onto something. In the late 1970s, anglophones had been a numerical minority in Montreal for a century, but they simply didn't think or act that way. It was an attitude that found ample support in *The* Gazette not just in that particular stretch of 100 years or so, but throughout most of the newspaper's existence.

So in that light, it comes as a bit of a surprise to consider how *The Gazette* began.

When *The Gazette* first appeared, in 1778, it was in French. Montreal was then a town of about 5,000 people and, despite its British administration, French was the language of the majority. But in another and I think important sense, *La Gazette du Commerce et Littéraire* was indeed speaking to a minority, not just that minority of Montrealers who were literate – civil administrators, judges, military officers, the clergy and so on – but to a still smaller group of people, professional men, by and large, who were sympathetic to the Enlightenment then sweeping Europe.

The Gazette was a newspaper of ideas, ideas that were distasteful, even dangerous, to those judges and priests I mentioned a moment ago. When Fleury Mesplet, *The Gazette's* founder, applied for permission to establish his newspaper, he promised the governor, Sir Guy Carleton, that he would behave, and indeed his newspaper did not run articles that, for example, might have seen something good or noble in the American Revolution, then under way. On the other hand, among the pieces it did print were many that attacked progressive thinking.

But Mesplet's heart wasn't in it. He had another, quite different agenda. He and his editor, Valentin Jautard, were much more at home with promoting the

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ideas of *philosophes* like Voltaire and Diderot, with deploring the low level of literacy in Montreal, with questioning arbitrary justice and the hold of the church on society. From time to time, they would slip into their pages something from this hidden agenda, and by June of the following year they found they had gone too far. Mesplet and Jautard were arrested, the newspaper was shut down, and they spent the next three years behind bars.

But Mesplet was nothing if not unsinkable. In 1785, three years after his release, he started up his newspaper once again. This time there was no camouflaging its anti-establishment soul, and this time it was bilingual, reflecting the influx into Montreal of Loyalists from the Thirteen Colonies and of other anglophones, as well as the continuing rise of the city's English-speaking merchant class.

But then, in 1794, Mesplet died, and this ordained as well the eventual death of his gingery sort of newspaper. In succeeding decades, notwithstanding its bilingual columns, *The Gazette* became more and more English-only in outlook: that is, more and more in tune with the conservative worldview of that growing merchant class. Where it had once questioned established authority, the newspaper now was most comfortable supporting it. It's surely no accident that in 1822, with English-speaking Montrealers poised to move into the majority, *The Gazette* gave up being bilingual. It now appeared three times a week, in English only.

Established authority was profoundly threatened by the demands of Louis-Joseph Papineau's Parti Rouge in the 1830s, and *The Gazette* for its part was profoundly unsettled. Political reform was all very well, but the Patriotes were moving altogether too fast. *The Gazette* found little to commend in Papineau's program.

It's important to remember that the Patriote movement was not exclusively French-speaking, and by and large *The Gazette* of the day didn't paint the struggle as a French-English thing. But nor did it shrink from endorsing the English-speaking Doric clubs, whom it saw as admirable defenders of the status quo. In truth, the Doric clubs were rabble-rousers who roamed the streets looking for the French-speaking Fils de la Liberté. Each side was charged with equal parts of self-righteousness and testosterone, and each wanted nothing better than to duke it out with the other.

The Gazette doubtless thought of itself as a voice of reason. But its voice was strident, not calming.

I can't guess how much *The Gazette* was leading anglophone opinion here, and how much it was following it. Suffice it to say that while the newspaper cannot be blamed for the open rebellion that broke out in 1837, it sure didn't help matters.

It was more of the same a decade later. Post-Durham Report, there was now a single colony divided into two parts, Canada East and Canada West, with a single legislature sitting in the St. Ann Market building in Youville Square. This legislature had significant autonomy in domestic affairs, and in its wisdom, it passed in 1849 the Rebellion Losses Bill. This would offer government compensation to property owners in Canada East who had suffered losses in 1837 and 1838.

However, the legislation made no distinction between those who had remained loyal and those who had supported the Patriotes. English Montreal, including *The Gazette*, was outraged.

By going along with the legislation, Lord Elgin, the governor general, was assisting at the birth of responsible government in this country. But for *The Gazette*, that didn't matter. Elgin was sanctioning a law, the newspaper said, "which is unparalleled in the whole history of the world, and which in principle strikes at the root of all Government." *The Gazette* could not tolerate what it saw as gross betrayal, and so, despite its normal inclinations, withdrew the support it would ordinarily give to established authority.

When Elgin emerged from the legislature after signing the Rebellion Losses Bill into law, he was pelted with abuse, eggs and much else besides. His mounted escort was lucky to get him away in one piece. That night, a mob, goaded in no small part by weeks of intemperate language in *The* Gazette, descended on the legislature and put it to the torch. A few days later, the rowdies trashed the home of the prime minister and chief architect of the legislation, Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine.

Never, I fear, has the newspaper served its readers – and by extension its city – so badly. The following year, the capital was moved to Toronto, and ultimately to Ottawa. Yet if the legislature had not been razed, I think it's highly likely the nation's capital would still be here, in the city where, after all, French and English meet as they do nowhere else in the country. That mob and English newspapers like *The Gazette* that stood with it have much to answer for.

The Gazette did much better a decade later with Confederation on the horizon. The narrow Toryism of the 1830s and 1840s had become sterile. Britain was growing tired of the expense and the fractious moods of its North American

colonies. And above all, there was the hulking presence of the United States. *The Gazette* remained steadfastly committed to the imperial connection, but it also saw a union of more or less autonomous colonies as necessary to the building of a modern nation and as a defense against American expansion.

Into the 1860s, it pleaded for the federal cause. It opened its pages to the apostles of Confederation, none more prominent or more articulate than Thomas D'Arcy McGee. It reported the confederation debates of 1864 in exhaustive detail. This was well into the Victorian age, so when I say exhaustive, I mean exhaustive. And, on a fine summer's day in 1867, *The Gazette* ran an editorial that could state in part, "There seems to be everywhere, throughout British America, a common feeling that this day, July the First, will mark an epoch in the history of... mankind." Again as in 1849, the language was over the top, but this time it was not on behalf of a crabbed minority.

Fast-foward some 40 years, however. By then, English Montrealers had slid back into the minority, making up perhaps a quarter of the city's population. But it was a minority merely of numbers, not of economic heft. Nor, more broadly, of social heft: English-speakers no matter what their wealth – and by no means were all of them wealthy – believed in their marrow that they mattered, a self-confidence mirrored in the pages of *The Gazette*. From a Square Mile mansion to the house of a skilled die-maker in Maisonneuve, from the laborer named Kelly in Griffintown to the schoolteacher named Smith in NDG, they did not feel outnumbered, much less threatened. Their society from top to bottom was complete, and for every anglo who also happened to speak French or who married a francophone, there were countless others for whom French Montreal scarcely existed at all.

Here's an instructive example. In 1910, Montreal was host to the 21st Eucharistic Conference. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics gathered here, the largest religious event Canada has ever seen. A highlight of the six-day festival was an evening of speechifying in Notre Dame Church, at which one of the speakers was Archbishop Francis Bourne of Westminster. He was England's senior Catholic. Even though he was fluent in French and the audience overwhelmingly French-speaking, he gave his address in English. Furthermore, he argued that English should become the principal language of the Church in North America. The audience was stunned, appalled and angry. There were jeers and whistles in the old church. In effect, the archbishop was calling for the abandonment of the generations-old struggle to preserve French.

Three speakers later, it was the turn of Henri Bourassa. He rose. He pointedly thrust his prepared text into his pocket. And then he launched into a passionate, impromptu defense of French. I won't pause to quote from it, but will say it created a sensation. Where there had been catcalls, now there was cheering throughout the huge church and out into Place d'Armes. The next day, of all the distinguished marchers in a long religious parade that wound through the city, Bourassa got more cheers than anyone else, even Prime Minister Laurier.

And *The Gazette*? It had covered the week's events in vast detail. It covered the speeches at Notre Dame, including Bourne's. And it covered Bourassa's – except it was the wrong speech, the one he shoved into his pocket and never gave. We carried not a word about what has come to be called le *discours de Notre Dame*, a significant moment in French-Canadian nationalism.

Perhaps a reporter had been assigned to attend the speeches and was knocked down by a horse or had some other accident. I fear, however, that *The Gazette* decided in advance to construct a story based on handed-out texts of the planned speeches, and thus overlooked the real news. The episode is painfully symptomatic of a kind of blindness at *The Gazette* toward the majority community, a blindness that helped reinforce its readers' ignorance.

There will be no prizes given this morning for guessing how *The Gazette* viewed conscription a few years later, nor how it did so during the Second World War. But it might be surprising to learn of an important *Gazette* position after the war – its comfort with the notion of provincial autonomy. The shifting balance of power in Ottawa's favour was all very well when fighting a war, but in peacetime, the newspaper believed, it risked alienating Quebec and threatening federalism.

But there was another thing going on here, of course. In supporting Maurice Duplessis and the Union Nationale, *The Gazette* was cleaving to its traditional support for established order.

I've referred to this traditional outlook several times. In my view, we should not too rigidly regard *The* Gazette in its first two centuries as an organ of the English-speaking community, as we understand that expression today. More to the point, it was the champion of the settled way of

doing things, and the enemy of those who would challenge that. Of course, those challenges frequently came from the French side of the great linguistic divide. But even when *The Gazette* deprecated French-speakers, contrasting their "excesses" with the "good sense" or "responsibility" or "loyalty" of English-speakers, it did so fundamentally because of what those French-speakers were saying, not because of the language in which they were saying it. It's a nuance, but I think a significant one.

The old *Gazette* was not St. George, standing on guard for English rights and the English language, for it simply did not regard English as under threat. It was a non-combatant in the language wars, and it did little to bring its readership up to date. By and large, it was indifferent to the aspirations of the French majority. No wonder that Quebec's first language legislation, Bill 63 and then Bill 22, caught it by surprise. No wonder that Bill 101 was such a shock.

John Kalbfleisch's Second Draft column on Montreal's history appears each Sunday in The Gazette.