

PARLIAMENTARIANS AND THE PROMOTION OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Over the years the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Association of French-Speaking Parliamentarians have sent observers to each others' meetings and collaborated informally in otherways. Publication of this article is in keeping with the oft-expressed desire of representatives to find ways to further develop friendly co-operation between the two associations.

Although I myself have never been part of an elected assembly, I had the privilege of regularly attending sittings of parliament for nine years as a parliamentary correspondent. On many occasions during the last four years I have also observed the work of Quebec parliamentarians at fairly close hand.

Of all those who operate the levers of State, parliamentarians are, increasingly, among those whose role, or rather, real influence, is most threatened. Alain Peyrefitte summed it up well, and his words are just as applicable now as before: The temptation used to be to make the executive a reflection of parliament. Nowadays the temptation is to make parliament a reflection of the executive. And Peyrefitte demanded a more active role for parliamentarians in the running of the State. The essential role of parliamentarians should not be to vote for or against the government, but to monitor its acts, and those of the departments which the ministers head. Monitoring means having the right to know and the responsibility to report. It means having the right to investigate government operations, the responsibility to report to the nation, and the privilege of imposing public debate.

In his book *The Trouble with the French*, Peyrefitte talks about the French government and proposes remedies for the French and their institutions. With a few minor changes, I think we can quite readily endorse his judgment and apply it to British-inspired and perhaps even American institutions.

In fact, parliaments have become the hostages of bureaucracies much more than their sources of inspiration. The executive holds a tremendous amount of power over the legislature, precisely because it can fall back on an administrative machine. Even the executive, which is recruited from among parliamentarians in our system, is itself a victim of the weight of bureaucracy. From experience a minister knows full well that the initiatives suggested to him by the bureaucrats have a much better chance of succeeding than those that he wishes to impose on them, either because they correspond to the wishes of parliamentarians or because they reflect his own concept of the public good. To get things moving, very often he will not hesitate to give preference to the bureaucrats' concept of the State, even if he has to face the displeasure of parliamentarians. He knows that ultimately they have no choice: they have to go along.

In this context, the job of parliamentarians is more difficult. It becomes increasingly so when they are fighting to advance ideas to which public servants are indifferent or even secretly or openly hostile. This was true in the case of initiatives to promote the French language, culture and civilization in federal institutions or provincial legislatures, except in Quebec, where the question was settled a long time ago.

At the federal level at least, parliamentarians have, for the most part, done their job as legislators very well. The laws governing the use of French are explicit and give it a more comfortable status. In principle, French

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and English are equal. This is a first step which is extremely important. It was by no means easy to have this obvious fact accepted, and those who devoted so much time and energy to winning this battle deserve the recognition of their fellow citizens. But these laws are just an operational framework, one which certainly outlines a new concept of relationships between groups and cultures, but which cannot take the place of reality.

The second step, translating the legislators' objectives into reality, will be the most difficult. And when he reaches the second step, the parliamentarian realizes how limited the means are at his disposal for imprinting French culture on the administration or even the daily life of the country.

With the tools at hand, frequently using the weapon of public opinion, parliamentarians succeed in correcting the most obvious faults and righting the most crying injustices, but they are most often condemned to react, whereas the bureaucracy has a monopoly on action. It is in this sense that I link the problem of the parliamentarian's real authority with his role as a promoter of the French language and culture.

If we put aside for a moment the special case of Quebec, where all dimensions of French culture are more firmly established, we have to recognize that the work of French-speaking parliamentarians, in Ottawa, especially, and in certain provinces, has profoundly changed people's way of thinking. At the same time, the fact that the French network of the CBC covers the entire country bears witness to the existence of a living non-English culture. These are things to be proud of. The job will, of course, never be completed and I'm already sure that the reports of the Commissioner of Official Languages in the twenty-first century will still be filled with horror stories like the ones with which we are already familiar.

At the same time that they must continue this vigilance, which is rather annoying but inevitable, because French is not supported by strength in numbers, I think members of parliament now have to aim at other targets. I am thinking mainly of cultural expression and even of science and technology and the business world.

You cannot like what you do not know. The resistance or indifference of the English-speaking public toward the French fact in Canada is undoubtedly still kept alive by prejudice, but it is mainly due to ignorance of this civilization. The inverse is also true in terms of French-speaking Quebecers' reactions to the other group's cultural expressions. This bridge has never really been crossed. I suggest that, French-speaking

parliamentarians can become efficient ambassadors of French culture throughout the country.

I happened to be in Ottawa the day Antonine Maillet won the Prix Goncourt. A quick check with some of my fellow journalists and some MPs soon showed me that, outside literary circles in Quebec and Acadia, this author was totally unknown. The significance of the event was lost on the people I questioned, and the Prix Goncourt meant absolutely nothing to most of them.

In her field, Antonine Maillet has done as much to show the rest of the country the vitality of French culture as most of the laws aimed at protecting the French language. But how do we let people know? For parliamentarians, this is an enormous challenge which, in my opinion, is not insurmountable.

The problem related to the language of science is more difficult, because we have to struggle against a more hermetic world, against traditions less open to change. All the same, if the French language is merely used as an administrative vehicle, most often through translation, it will perish, because it will not have kept touch with the most profound changes to take place in the last half of this century. Parliamentarians, not only from Canada, but from all over the French-speaking world, must work hard to pool human and financial resources and ensure the contribution of French-speaking scientists and researchers in areas of advanced technology.

The fortunes of languages are tied to war and political and economic upheaval. Those that come to the fore are transmitted by countries which, among other things, use efficient means to disseminate their literary, scientific or technical work. Russian, for example, was taught in only 23 countries in 1964. Today, it is taught in 40 countries. But even when scientific documentation written in Russian accounted for only 11 per cent of all the documentation inventoried by the UN in 1963, Russian scientists were not writing in any other language but their own. Everyone else, including the Americans, had to translate.

The world of science and technology is so dominated by the Americans that otherwise culturally strong countries such as France, Germany and Italy prefer to use English rather than their national languages in order to reach the international scientific community.

In this context, it is not surprising that Canada is literally overcome by the American influence and that French-speaking authors and researchers have a natural tendency to use English.

According to professor Arnold Drapeau of the *Ecole polytechnique de Montréal*, researchers at the school and those at the University of Quebec, the *Institut national de recherche scientifique*, the *Institut Armand-Frappier* and even Hydro Quebec prefer to write their papers in English in order to be sure of reaching the international scientific community.

This phenomenon is easy to understand. Cultural pressure from the United States, already very strong in everyday life, becomes enormous in such a specialized field as science. Must we accept the inevitable and not do anything to counteract this tendency, which makes all efforts to widen the sphere of influence of the French-speaking society in this country totally meaningless?

doing more than simply adding another world competitor to the existing giants. They are also breaking into the field of energy research, they are counting on Canadians' developing their own original technology, whose main challenge is to defeat a harsh climate. These are sectors in which French culture has its place and must be present; otherwise it will be deprived of a powerful means of leverage. As legislators, certainly, but particularly in their capacity as supervisors of public administration, parliamentarians can do their part to facilitate penetration of the French language into all sectors of activity.

Personally, I am rather optimistic in this respect, partly because the province of Quebec takes its role as



Whether they sit in Ottawa, Quebec City, Fredericton or Toronto, French-speaking parliamentarians cannot remain indifferent to the disturbing phenomenon of the marginalization of French as a language of scientific communication. If there is a sector where an organization like the Association of French Speaking parliamentarians can serve as a meeting ground for setting up a joint undertaking, if only to determine the causes for the erosion of French in the problematic field of science, it is certainly the sector of scientific communication.

The same concerns hold true for the world of business. In creating Petro-Canada, promoters are

the pivot of French life on this continent very seriously and also because I have noticed that the quality of French life has greatly improved in the last few years. French is being spoken more widely and, what is more important, with greater care. Federal institutions, whose influence is considerable, are using French more. If we look at a map of the world, we can see that America, and especially Canada, is the only region where French is on the upswing. It is losing ground in Indochina. It has almost disappeared from the Middle East, as one of my Lebanese colleagues told me only recently. In Egypt, only a small elite which is decreasing in size from year to year continues to keep the faith. In North Africa, the keen interest in a new Arab civilization offers stiff com-

petition to French. In Francophone Africa, the situation is more encouraging, but remains changeable. French meets its stiffest competition of all in Europe.

In this context, I feel that we are not managing too badly in North America, where, increasingly, there is new interest and people are awakening to a culture which is no longer regarded as a threat, but as a happy addition to their heritage.

The program is vast and ambitious, but its completion starts with little things. Thus, through television, I have noticed that both French- and English-speaking parliamentarians have acquired a taste for speaking their respective languages better, which can only act as a good influence. If this concern for excellence is also transmitted to the administration, in order to improve the quality of public documents and publications, we will have achieved something very important. If French-language cultural products find their way beyond the boundaries of Quebec and the Francophone zones scattered here and there across the continent, it will be the sign of a real leap forward.

I do not claim that parliamentarians can do everything themselves, nor that they have been passive. But I think that they still have an extremely important role to play, if they equip themselves with means of action so that promotion of the French language and culture can go beyond statutory provisions and at last enter the real world.

Language is a tool, an instrument to be used to make contact with a culture, a civilization; to continue and extend that culture, to develop that civilization. The fight for excellence in written and spoken language is therefore never over. In Canada, and especially in Quebec, there is a danger in thinking that we can turn

things around by passing a few affirmative laws. This is a danger we must fight.

School occupies an important place in this fight. The media, whether they use written or spoken language, also exercise a great influence. Depending on the importance they attach to language quality and the distribution of written material in French, public administrators also play a major role. Parliamentarians cannot replace teachers, journalists, artists and writers. But as far as government is concerned, they are the public's main agents.

A little while ago I said I was rather optimistic about strengthening of the influence of the French language in our part of the continent. But I am nonetheless concerned about the many assaults to which it is subjected.

I can find no better way to express this concern than the words of a French teacher at the CEGEP in Chicoutimi, Mr. Jean-Yves Bourque, who concluded his participation in a conference on language quality as follows: "We are a small people swimming in a sea of English. Up to now we've been content to float around on our backs and we've been reasonably successful. But the sharks are starting to snap at our backsides. We're going to have to find some way to get to shore."

When parliamentarians from various legislatures and countries find it important to meet and work together, as French-speaking parliamentarians, it is proof that the way of which Mr. Bourque spoke is easier to find than we think. For my part, I firmly believe that we will reach shore. The only question that remains to be answered is this: how many of us will there be?

(Translated from French)

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