

IS CANADA AT LAST ACCEPTING HER OWN REALITY?  
To the Canadian Club of Toronto, January 9, 1978

by Hugh MacLennan

If I may begin by relating my title to myself, few things have made me feel more remote from reality this past year than the numerous friendly journalists and acquaintances who have been asking me what I thought of our present Canadian political crisis. Why me? I am an extremely private person and what did I know except what I read in the newspapers and heard on the television? And having read the papers and listened to the TV, still what did I know?

People came to me because of a novel I published thirty-three years ago, and in this book the most dramatic part of the action occurs ~~between~~ in 1917 and 1919--roughly sixty years ago, and when we consider all that has happened to the world since then, these sixty years seem longer than <sup>a part of</sup> a century.

Last fall I read in a Toronto newspaper column that an unnamed gentleman identified only as "a Canadian economic nationalist", had dismissed my book as valueless because ~~it was~~ according to him it was out of date in the year of its publication, which was 1945. I wish he was right. If he was thinking of Canada solely in economic terms he was certainly as right <sup>So were</sup> as those Victorian historians who used to insist that the only reason why Marc Antony became involved with Cleopatra was to gain control of the Egyptian wheat crop ~~and~~ and use it to pay his troops and bribe the Roman electorate with free grain. This idea <sup>was certainly</sup> may have been in Antony's mind when he landed in Alexandria, but soon afterwards other factors entered the equation. There is no doubt whatever that Somerset Maugham was right when he said that between Antony and Cleopatra there was something far more concrete, and far more interesting, <sup>exciting</sup> than an economic situation.

There is also something between Quebec and the rest of Canada more exciting than an economic situation. And as I live in Quebec, and am a member of a minority which is gleefully being instructed by Quebec politicians in what it feels ~~it~~ like to

be in a minority, I ask you to take my word for it that TWO SOLITUDES is not considered entirely passé in La Belle Province, and for a reason that is at the root of Canada's problem as a nation. ¶ The collective mind of English-Canada, like that of the United States and to a lesser degree of England, is pragmatic. As ~~external~~ external conditions change, the pragmatist tends to put the past behind him. But for centuries the Quebec élite has been trained to venerate St. Thomas Aquinas and he was no pragmatist. Only twenty years ago the famous Canon Groulx was still proclaiming the slogan, notre maître, le passé. Quebec never forgets her past. She has ~~not forgotten~~ the Conquest, ~~she has not forgotten~~ she has not forgotten 1837, ~~she has not forgotten~~ she has not forgotten Louis Riel, she has not forgotten and never will forget what was done to her in 1917. She has ~~enshrined~~ enshrined this habit of mind in the motto on her crest--je me souviens--I remember.

¶ The new breed of Québécois, ~~whether~~ the middle-class products of Quebec's belated industrial revolution, Bourassa's crowd who thought of themselves as ~~as~~ ~~as~~ technocrats, le Parti Québécois which thinks it is planning a political revolution ~~with~~ according to all the formulas in the text books--like their emotions are still involved with the past emotions of the French Canadian people. In this sense they are right in saying that Quebec is truly a nation. The tragedy--or the comedy--depending on how you look at it, ~~comes~~ comes from their emotional incapacity to understand the Anglo-American pragmatic experience, while at the same time the pragmatists are/ incapable of putting themselves into the minds of a people who love Pepsi Cola and fast cars and Florida vacations, yet can be passionately turned on by the chansons of Gilles Vigneault. ¶ As a descendant of enclosed and evicted Highland Scots, I have ~~never~~ never had any difficulty in understanding this apparent contradiction. I have seen, and probably you have two, stern-faced Canadian-Scottish bankers and business ~~men~~ men turn into ~~an~~ entirely different personalities ~~when~~ when the pipes play Jacobite music. In 1703 the Scotchman Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun wrote the famous sentence: "Give me the making of the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws." The hard facts of history, however, ~~were~~ were soon to prove that in Scotland

~~that~~ it was the losers who made the best songs, and the winners who made the most money. And which of them chose the better part is still an open question.

To return briefly to that novel of mine; I myself had virtually forgotten it until recent events made me re-read it. Its title had been used so often by politicians that I had almost come to believe that it was a political novel. I re-discovered that it is nothing of the kind. It is a fairly simple tale of people living together in an area where religious traditions and economic habits made it almost impossible for them to know one another. Priests and Protestant ministers and above all the two school systems set Quebec's ~~divided~~ French and English populations apart, ~~from~~ and in the middle the politicians and the operators operated with great profit to themselves. The history taught to the French Canadian children was diametrically opposed to the history taught to the English children and the two shared but a single common denominator. One was as misleading as the other.

Yet ~~English~~ Canada in those days was generally a stable society economically, just as was the Hapsburg Empire before Woodrow Wilson demanded its disintegration in the name of the self-determination of nations. It had been stable despite the <sup>facts</sup> ~~fact~~ that its <sup>various</sup> ~~various~~ ethnic groups spoke different languages and were systematically taught by their leaders to detest each other. Was Canada, I used to wonder, another version of this?

On the surface the resemblances are certainly suggestive, but under the surface they are not even close. In Canada even Quebec lives in what still is a New World. No Turks or Mongols invaded our territories

and butchered or ~~enslaved~~ enslaved our ancestors. No archdukes sold our able-bodied young men as soldiers to foreign armies. True, the federal government in 1917 imposed conscription on Quebec and it is futile to demand that English-Canada, and especially the Conservative Party, has been paying for that ever since. But not even our two conscription crises put us in the same class as the succession states of the Holy Roman Empire. We are still adolescents here, and while this may be embarrassing to our amour propre, hopefully it has some advantages for the future. <sup>The hatred</sup> ~~Quarrels~~ of adults tend to ~~be implacable~~, as that prime adolescent American president Woodrow Wilson, discovered at Versailles in 1919. But the quarrels between adolescents can quickly turn <sup>to</sup> friendship after a good show-down.

The questions I now ask myself are these: What is this crisis of ours really about? Why do so many of our politicians, though not ~~think~~ <sup>and M. Levesque,</sup> Mr. Trudeau, seem suddenly so irrelevant? Again, if Canada is in a state of genuine hostility, why is it that on a person-to-person basis the Anglophones and Francophones of Quebec have never been so cordial to each other as they are now? (The answer to this is easy enough; at long last, most Quebec Anglophones are learning French.)

But how about this one? In the Colliseum in Quebec City, not too far from the provincial assembly where reigns at present that curious government of ex-professors, ex-journalists, ex-psychiatrists, ex-priests and ~~prêtres~~ manqués--why there, barely a fortnight ago, did a crowd of 6,000 Québécois roar their support for the junior Team Canada against the Soviet team although, so far as I know, not a single Québécois was in the line-up? ~~Not a single~~ Nor, again so far as I know, did any ~~newspaper~~ newspaper suggest that this might have been the reason why Team Canada lost. Are we really in a crisis? There is no doubt that we are, but it has few of the earmarks of a crisis as they understand the word in Europe and the Middle East.

I am no sage and no political scientist and I profoundly mistrust abstractions when they are applied either to human beings or to what

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Dr. Camille Laurin calls la collectivité. So, as well I know, do hundreds of thousands of French Canadians. The nickname they give Dr. Laurin is la mère supérieure, probably because of the holy forbearance of his manner when he psychoanalyzes la collectivité in public. As for René Levesque-- his surname as you know means "bishop"--a French Canadian student remarked me with a grin, "Plus ça change, le plus c'est la même chose. Au Québec il est encore impossible d'échapper des évêques."

No, I prefer human beings to abstractions made about them, especially in a country like Canada which only recently has begun to think seriously about what this whole nation amounts to. It is to many of these abstractions that we owe our present state of confusion. It is because of them that English-Canadian and French-Canadian nationalisms don't speak the same language. And once again we have to look into the past to understand why.

Modern nationalism is largely a nineteenth century phenomenon and it arose as a defence mechanism against the exploitation of unorganized ethnic groups by highly organized imperial powers like France of Louis XIV and Napoleon, like Austria and Imperial Russia, like France and Britain in the Orient. Inevitably it became mixed up with ~~other~~ 19th century ideologies like communism, socialism and anarchism and in Italy and Nazi Germany they became fused into national-socialism. Inevitably, again, nationalism elevated to the status of a lay religion produced fanatical loyalties. And on this word "loyalty", let's pause.

Until the end of the Hitler War, ~~namely~~ the really passionate loyalties felt in Canada had all been born in Europe and had emigrated here with the various waves of settlement. After the Conquest, the loyalty of les Québécois was fixed firmly on the French Canadian tribe and the French-Canadian Catholic Church. In English-Canada, after the American Revolution, it was pinned on Great Britain even by the Scotch who were my own ancestors, and who had been enclosed by their chiefs or transported because some of their chiefs had made ~~alliances~~ alliances with France against England in the mid-18th century. As a child in Halifax during the Kaiser's War I was taught



habit, and I submit that the political habits of English-Canada from

the end of the First Great War until very recently were induced into us

through a kind of hypnotic process by that weird creature, Mackenzie King.

Will his legacy ever leave us?

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This sly, ponderous, self-footed, Presbyterian leprechaun with the emo-

tional development of a ten year old mother's boy and the political vision

of the Vicar of Bray--this man governed Canada longer than any other

politician governed any other democracy in the entire history of the world

built into his party his own attitudes, and his party was almost always

in power. Gentlemen, I have read Macchiavelli, but not even in Macchiavelli

have I encountered a politician who remotely resembles <sup>his own</sup> Mackenzie King

The question that must be asked is what was his real approach to politics

in this country? It was certainly more than a mere wish to stay in office

forever. With his <sup>ambitions</sup> to Eternity, with the constant advice he

received from heaven via his mother and his dogs, we may be sure that he

was convinced that he was right in everything, that his way was not only

the correct way but one ordained by God Himself, that his methods must be

followed by his subordinates, that his habit of mind should become the

habit of mind of the nation. <sup>self, for in time it curled into a tight Schizophrasia</sup> This man's hypocrisy was unlike even to him

but to essential problems what was his approach? Tactically, he could

use more tricks than all our politicians put together, but strategically

he believed that the best way to confront a real <sup>problem</sup> ~~problem~~ within the

nation was to ignore its existence if possible, and if impossible, so

to obfuscate it in confusion that after he was finished with handling it,

nobody knew clearly what it had been in the first place. He could not speak

a coherent phrase in the French language. He did not like French Canadians

was in But thanks to the Conservatives, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Quebec in the Liberal pocket,

so he <sup>found it was his French Government's</sup> let the sleeping dogs lie. So, it often seemed, did most of <sup>life of Englishmen</sup> Englishmen

English-Canada long after King had ascended into heaven to sit at the feet

of his mother and at the right paw of his dog. Then came René Levesque's

Victory on November 15, 1976, and at last the whole nation woke up.

On the day to day exchanges between the French and English in Quebec, the Péquiste victory has, if anything, improved the situation. The trouble is, of course, that the Péquiste government is not only a government of amateur theoreticians; it is a government of intellectuals who have never had to meet ~~any demand~~ <sup>a payroll</sup> ~~xxx~~ who think of themselves as crusaders. Nearly all the young intellectuals among les Québécois--though not all the other young are probably separatists ~~xxxxxxx~~ <sup>This is a sure</sup> ~~xxxxxxx~~ <sup>movement</sup> guarantee that the ~~movement~~ will either collapse or turn into something very different, for whenever intellectuals have been unanimous about anything, History has never failed to prove them wrong. At any rate, the comfortable old Canadian fog has to some extent been dissipated by Levesque's victory and several important truths have become extremely visible.

The first is that the Anglophone majority of the country has been forced to pay the price for ignoring the psychological realities of the French Canadian people. It has been forced to admit that a nation consisting of two such different traditions cannot be governed satisfactorily by the sheer voting power of the majority. It is not Joe Clark's fault that as a political leader he has become as irrelevant as a spectator at a football match. The same applies to the Anglophone ministers in Mr. Trudeau's cabinet. At the moment--I'm not saying in the future--the ball game for Canada is being played out by French Canadians--Pierre Trudeau and his Francophone colleagues against René Levesque and his Péquistes.

The second truth is that at last, and from coast to coast, English-Canada has become aware that this country we have taken for granted might be lost to us. Few Anglos any more repeat that inane and petulant question "What does Quebec want?" Many more are asking, "What do we want?" the decks have been cleared for a

The third truth is that a fundamental debate within Quebec itself. The debate was always there, and as one French Canadian observer put it, it is a debate between the heart and the head. Why not? This is the basic debate within every human individual who ever was born.

A year ago Levesque spoke entirely from the ~~xxxxx~~ heart, and while

and while doing so he made a good many statements he must now regret. He pulled the emotions out of the crowd and threw it back to them, so that watching him in action with a crowd of his reporters was like watching a kind of love-making. ~~Was~~ On the night of November 15, 1976, the lift of heart among the Québécois was wonderful to see and the east end of Montreal had the aspect of a carnival. No wonder ~~English-Canadians were~~ English-Canadians were ~~English-Canadians were~~ aghast when they heard about it. But it was not caused by what looked like a successful revolt against Canada. It was caused by a tremendous self-assertion, and behind it lay a long and ~~non-~~ ~~non-~~ too-honourable history of frustration. In 1837 the Papineau Rebellion was crushed when the Hierarchy sided with the British authorities. The same fate awaited Louis Riel, with ~~the~~ the British being replaced by Macdonald's Tories. The same routine went into action during the two conscriptions crises. But this time nobody intervened to put down the victory of the heart. Its assertion was complete, and ~~of~~ a shrewd observer noted that this, in itself, might prove to be enough.

Now after a year of edicts and ukases from Levesque's government, accompanied by a declining economy and a substantial flight of capital, the head is beginning to mount the inevitable counter attack against raw emotion. Levesque speaks little about independence now and much more about ~~sovereignty~~ what he calls sovereignty-association, and his opponents point out that if he means it, the whole performance has been a case of much ado about nothing, for Quebec, without a single Anglophone in the ruling party, has sovereignty-association now.

Even if Quebec But it is not that simple. ~~Quebec~~ / could go it alone without becoming totally bankrupt, I don't believe the majority --and certainly not those over thirty-five--would desire this, though they would accept it if unless there were drastic changes in the attitudes of the Anglo-Canadians. What they really want, the majority and not the wild men, is a new place and a new respect for the French Reality in a new nation. The average Anglophone Canadian resident in Quebec, who is not rich, who corresponds to no cheap stereotype, who was often as thoroughly screwed by the

operators as the French were--but screwed mainly by their own Anglophone masters--he understands this now pretty well. He will be able to get along with the French very easily and very happily. And if the rest of Canada agrees with him, then Pierre Trudeau will win the ball game.

Now--as they used to say on the radio--let's pause for station identification. And in this pause let's ask ourselves the question--what IS the ball game?

Just after I wrote the last of these pages, I left my typewriter and listened to the news and learned that the Sun Life Company had moved to Toronto and that Bevesque and Pariseau were furious. Suddenly it was as though all the masks had been dropped. The St. Lawrence, like the Rhine, the Danube and the Mississippi, has always been an imperial river. It was the inland gateway to the continent of North America. The English conquered it for the sake of their colonists. Immediately afterwards, rid of any fear from the French, their colonists revolted. Thanks to the French and the Catholic Church, the English held the St. Lawrence and so the country called Canada was born.

Now Dr. Laurin speaks of the "reconquest" and this meant the reconquest of Montreal's English money power. <sup>There is the economic meaning of his concept of a new</sup> So the money power moves higher up the river system and settles in the new/imperial city. And watching this--a Canadian neither English nor French--I said to myself, "God damn it! How long does this sort of quarrel have to go on?" And then I thought: "The French and the Germans fought for centuries over the Rhine and the end they are in the same position they were before, but neither have the same power. And I thought again: "The source of the Rhine is in Switzerland." And I thought again: "The ultimate source of the St. Lawrence is in the United States." And I thought finally: "We are still the trustees of a marvellous land, one of the supreme prizes in the world. And quoting Lincoln: 'If we do not make common cause to save the good old ship of the Union on this voyage nobody will have a chance to pilot her on another voyage!'"