

Municipal Reorganization is a Disaster

By *Anthony Housefather*

When reading the Quebec Government's Bill 170, I began feeling physically ill. Nervous flutters, a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach....symptoms I recognized from the weeks prior to the 1995 Quebec referendum. The feeling I had when I felt that I might lose my country was one that I will never forget. Now I feel that the PQ Government wants to take away my town, my home, my community and my way of life. Worse still they say that they will not even recognize votes held on the issue. Very democratic!

For those who saw a glimmer of hope in the Bernard Report that local communities would survive in the Bouchard/Bourque island-wide city, that hope quickly dissipated when reading Bill 170. Rather than the quasi-municipalities that the Bernard report envisaged, the boroughs would be no more than districts of the City of Montreal. The limited powers that a borough would have according to the law, are limited still further by subjecting them to plans developed by the City of Montreal. This is the case when it comes to economic development or fire prevention. Moreover, the local borough has power of local parks and local roads... unless the central City decides that they are under its jurisdiction. Finally, Section 73 of the Act states that "The City Council may, by a by-law adopted by two-thirds of the votes of its members, order that it has jurisdiction in all or part of a field within the authority of the borough councils." Therefore the City of Montreal can simply remove all powers from the boroughs by a two-thirds vote. Imagine how the PQ would feel if the Parliament of Canada had the authority to take away the powers of the Quebec legislature in that manner.

Worse still the local boroughs have no taxation powers. Therefore they are dependant on the City of Montreal providing them with transfer payments to fund local services. Does anyone believe that the Cote Saint Luc Library would still be open 365 days a year, when City of Montreal libraries are now open only half as many hours? Would money be made available to buy more books for suburban libraries or equipment for suburban facilities when they are so much more equipped than those in the City of Montreal? How about road repairs and snow clearing? Nothing would stop us from sinking to the level of services currently available in the City of Montreal.

Some are asking why the Parti Quebecois, has now gravitated to Mayor Bourque's support for one island one city. The answer is easy. In doing so they believe they will control the levers of Quebec's biggest city. The Minister of Municipal Affairs is mandated to appoint a transition committee of between 5 and 7 people to manage the

reorganization of the Montreal area. This committee of non-elected people appointed by the PQ are mandated to name the Director General, the clerk and the treasurer of the City and may appoint the heads of all departments and assistant heads. Therefore, even before the elected leadership of the new City is in place, the PQ will appoint the entire senior staff of the new city. How many members of the English-speaking or cultural communities does one imagine will be appointed? How many federalists? The bureaucracy has a lot of power and on a day to day basis influence the running of the city as much as the elected officials. Those PQ appointees may serve in these posts for decades and certainly the complexion of the city will be set by the PQ appointees.

The PQ will also be able to reduce bilingual services by moving forward with the merger. Many have erroneously reported that bilingual services in bilingual municipalities will not be affected. This is manifestly not the case. Although the law has recognized that the bilingual municipalities would maintain such status as boroughs, the services provided that are transferred to the City government will no longer be bilingual. For example the municipal court will be run by the City not the borough. So, now not only will someone have to travel for an hour to contest a parking ticket, but the ticket and its instructions will no longer be bilingual. Taxation is run by the City so tax bills and documentation will no longer be bilingual. Worse still the boroughs, will have no employees. All hiring and firing will be done by the City of Montreal. Therefore the right of bilingual municipalities to automatically require English as a job skill will not apply to any employee hired by the central City. Who can assure the boroughs that all employees assigned to work in the borough will be bilingual? Moreover the Government is attempting to make it even more difficult in the future to acquire bilingual status by requiring towns or boroughs qualifying to be more than 50% mother-tongue English, thus reducing the community to its lowest possible numbers. In this way and by gerrymandering the boundaries of districts, the PQ will manage to avoid according bilingual status to the residents of NDG, Snowdon, Cote des Neiges and Ville Marie.

I am convinced that the PQ also believes that in getting rid of troublesome federalists who are elected to serve in suburban communities they will diminish the threat of partition. All of the unity resolutions adopted by the suburban communities would disappear and the number of elected representatives from these communities would drop precipitously. For example, Hampstead, Cote Saint Luc and Montreal West cumulatively have 3 Mayors and 18 councilors. Under the proposed legislation, this district would have only 3 councilors out of 71 in the City of Montreal. Fewer federalist voices at the elected level to oppose the PQ and less contact and services to the population. It is, in my view, very unlikely that the people living in the suburbs who attend council meetings held down the street will drive to Montreal City Hall to

pose questions to the mayor and council. We already feel that it is very difficult to have an impact on the federal and provincial governments. Now the municipal government will become just as removed from the population. The proliferation of political parties to local municipalities will also change the dynamics of politics in most suburbs in a very negative way. Many quality people, local mayor and councillors who serve their city on nights and weekends, in addition to their regular job, would no longer be able to serve as elected representatives in a mega-city that would require full time councillors.

So how do we fight this? First by uniting. This is an issue that should unite English and French speaking people across the Montreal, South Shore, Outaouais and Quebec City areas. MNA's, Mayors, Councillors and lobby groups like Alliance Quebec have to work together to mobilize the population. Second, we need people to vote in Hampstead, Baie d'Urfe, Montreal West and Westmount and any other cities holding referendums on Sunday. Third people need to attend rallies and demonstrations and write and call the PQ MP's. All of these addresses are available on the web site that AQ has cooperated in building (www.notomergers.com). Fourth, we need to convince all Quebecers to mobilize against the Bloc Quebecois in the upcoming federal election to send a message to the PQ. Finally we need to make it clear to the Government that we will take the matter to court should they proceed to pass this law, for which they had no mandate, against the will of the citizens. The cause is not lost. We must never give up our cities, our homes and communities! The PQ is assuming that we will be apathetic. Help your mayor and council in proving them wrong.

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