

SPEECH TO THE ST. JAMES LITERARY SOCIETY

[by William Johnson, President, Alliance Quebec]

On April Fool's day, April 1, 1977, Camille Laurin published his white paper that announced Bill 101, *La politique québécoise de la langue française*. The white paper pretended to present a summary of all previous research on the status and state of the French language, such as that done by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and the Gendron Commission that had reported just five years before.

But instead of laying out the facts, the white paper laid out the myths. Francophones supposedly had incomes as low as aboriginal Canadians'. They all had to speak English at work. The French language was in constant deterioration and in danger of disappearing. English-speaking Canadians all agreed that English was the only language of Canada.

As I read the white paper that day - I was a reporter at the National Assembly for the *Globe and Mail*, one sentence stood out egregiously as false. It was said to be a fact revealed by the Gendron Commission:

"English predominates clearly in general communications at work: 82 per cent of all communications are carried out in English in Quebec as a whole; 84 per cent in Montreal, and 70 per cent in the province outside Montreal. English is also preponderant in more specific modes of communication."

I had read the report of the Gendron Commission, and it had found, contrary to popular belief, that most French-speaking Quebecers worked most of the time in French, not English. I inquired from Camille Laurin's office as to where I could find the sentence they had put in quotation marks, but they wouldn't tell me. So I returned to the report of the Gendron Commission, and there I found the sentence. But it described the language of communications at work of English-speaking Quebecers, not all Quebecers, and certainly not of French-speaking Quebecers.

The white paper was a shameless piece of dishonest propaganda worthy of a Goebbels. But at least it was clear and honest in one respect: that the Charter of the French Language was to reshape, refashion, restructure Quebec society and Quebec's economy from the top, so as to eliminate the institutional structure of English which had been characteristic of Quebec for two centuries.

"The Quebec that we want to build will be essentially French... In a word, the Quebec whose portrait as a whole is already sketched out in the Charter is a French-language society. There will no longer be any question of a bilingual Quebec. ... This use ((of French)) will symbolize and favour a reconquest by the French-speaking majority of Quebec of the control which it should have over the levers of the economy."

That word, reconquest. That was, indeed, the objective of Camille Laurin and the other intégristes who constructed Bill 101. They wanted to wipe out the conquest of 1759-1763 and refashion Quebec so that the English interval would be as if it had never happened. The English dimension of Quebec's history, of its institutions, of its very identity, was to be gradually denied, dismantled and eradicated.

Bill 101 built on a similar but less ambitious intention of Bill 22, passed by the Bourassa Liberals in 1974. Bill 22 claimed to make French the sole official language of Quebec. It stated: "Le français est la langue officielle du Québec." Bill 22's statement was not an accurate description of fact: English remained in fact an official language, since an official language is one that, by law, the government must use. And, of course, the National Assembly had to use English as well as French to pass any bill, and the English text remained as official as the French.

But Bill 22's "le français est la langue officielle du Québec" was a programmatic statement: it established that the state would henceforth be authorized to penetrate where previously it has feared to tread. To achieve the pre-eminence of French, the state could now remove long-held rights, limit freedoms, intrude into contractual relations, and establish a vast program of state supervision of most areas of life outside the family and religion. As the most statist law ever passed in Canada, it changed the relationship between the individual and the state in pursuit of the ideological commitment to transform Quebec into a French society. Dirigisme, the trusteeship of the state over the individual, was established in principle. Individuals could not be trusted to make enlightened choices: if left to themselves, they would continue to use English as well as French. The state must now stand guard over the whole society to ensure the preeminence of French.

In other words, Bill 22 prepared Bill 101. The Charter of the French Language, just like "La loi de la langue officielle," affirmed, incorrectly: "Le français est la langue officielle du Québec." This time, though, the bill went further, specifying that the laws would henceforth be passed in French, with only the French text as official. That was struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada in the 1979

Blaikie case, but the Charter of the French Language was never rectified insofar as it continued to affirm: "le français est la langue officielle du Québec.

A second concept was added to further downgrade English: French must become the common language of Quebec. How can you impose a common language? Only by prohibiting wherever judged possible the obvious other common language of Quebec: English.

The genius of Bill 101 is that it proceeded so gradually in its dismantlement that the English-speaking community was never fully aware of what was happening. Moreover, that community was stunned by the coming to power of the Parti Québécois the previous November 15. The English-speaking community had been shocked by Robert Bourassa's Bill 22 in 1974, which presumed to disestablish English. It protested strongly, and largely voted for the Union nationale in the 1976 elections. But here was an even worse anglophobic party come to power, with the intention of separating Quebec from Canada. The English-speaking community, faced with two hostile parties, lost its will to fight injustice. Between 1976 and 1986, 202,113 English-speaking Quebecers left for other provinces. Those who remained chose to surrender more or less quietly their language rights rather than stir up a storm and possibly jeopardize the federalist case in the looming referendum on secession. They traded their rights for peace and national unity. They lost their rights but they got neither peace nor national unity.

And so it has been to a large extent ever since. There have been individual court actions and scattered protests. But the English-speaking community has not, for the most part, attacked frontally the very conception of the Charter of the French Language, which is to diminish or dismantle gradually most of our schools, our hospitals, our municipalities, our colleges, even our universities. In a literal sense, the object of Bill 101 was and is to make us disappear.

And that is why Premier Bouchard, language chief inquisitor Louise Beaudoin, along with the fellow travelers in the corporatist structure of Quebec, all went to great lengths a couple of weeks ago to prevent our English language from appearing on signs in stores. They could not endure that we give tangible signs of our presence, of our visibility, above all, of our legitimacy in Quebec. And the leader of the opposition, Liberal chief Jean Charest, urged the stores not to put up English on signs. Only, hypocritically, they did not say they wanted us to get lost. They said: "don't upset the linguistic balance." Jean Charest said: "Ne soyex pas à la remorque de Bill Johnson." And the corporatist leaders of Quebec made themselves accessories: the presidents of the teachers union, the Quebec Federation of Labour, the Confederation of

National Trade Unions, the farmers' union, the Union of Writers - even the English-language writers union -all banded together in an infamous conspiracy to keep us invisible.

Many people have said - why make an issue of signs? Don Macpherson has written in a column that he doesn't care in what language the restaurant's sign is written as long as the coffee is good. But this superficial comment misses the point: why does Lucien Bouchard care so much about a few signs in Eaton's? Why do all the corporatist allies think it is important enough to threaten retaliation against any store that now puts up English signs? Because they understand that their campaign to suppress English will falter if English is, once again, publicly recognized as legitimate, as normal, as part of Quebec's life and its identity. That's why they will go to such lengths to prevent that happening. The signs are symbols and they tell a story. In Quebec, some stories must not be told because they conflict with official orthodoxy.

Bill 101 did its work and English-speaking Quebecers began to feel its effects, most notably on the English schools. Here is what the (Chambers) Task Force on English Education said in its 1992 Report to the Minister of Education of Quebec:

"English education is a social system under siege. Uncertainty obscures the way ahead. ...School enrollments have declined dramatically, affecting access to programs and support services in many areas. Further deterioration will undermine renewal of Quebec's English-speaking population." (p. 14)

Recall, this was the task force chaired by Gretta Chambers, hardly a figure of extremism, and yet the analysis presented then, more than six years ago, is not different from what I would make today.

"There is a widespread conviction among English-speaking Quebecers that their community is considered expendable by Quebec's French-speaking majority. This makes efforts at securing the future and quality of English education appear futile." (p. 4)

And this:

"Despite differences among regions, in their situations and aspirations, and despite differences among the perceptions of different groups to whom we listened - parents, students, teachers, administrators, school board members, community groups - some common themes emerged: 1. English-speaking

Quebecers do not feel welcome or wanted in Quebec." (p. 26) And a final quotation - perhaps final in every sense of the word:

"Quebec's English-speaking community as a working part of the larger Quebec society cannot function without the requisite human resources to make its collective contribution. If it is prevented from renewing itself, it will simply fade away. Continuing to shut it off from its traditional sources of replenishment can and will be construed as a delayed but deliberate death sentence." (p. 4)

So you see, if Jean Charest is right when he says there is now a consensus in Quebec about the language laws, then I can only come to one conclusion: it is a consensus for a "delayed but deliberate death sentence" for the English-language community.

So, my friends, our work is cut out for us. We must work at two levels. At the general level, we must attack the anglophobia that is gradually strangling our institutions one by one. We must present our case to our fellow citizens, we must raise their consciousness, we must touch their hearts and appeal to their consciences, to renegotiate the social contract between the English and French-speaking peoples of Quebec. We must, once again, rehabilitate English in Quebec.

But that means we must clear up the confusions that obscure understanding and unmask the myths that are used to justify the unjustifiable - you know, that French is threatened in North America because it is a drop in an "Anglo-Saxon" ocean; or, what right to Anglos have to complain when they are the best-treated minority in the world.

We must clear up confusion by clearly identifying, isolating, circumscribing and making people aware of the face of the enemy, which is anglophobia,. We must show that the repression exercised against English is not inadvertent, incidental, episodic, unintended: it is deliberately institutionalized and inherent in the Charter of the French Language, it is vested in both major political parties, the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party. And it is unjust.

But that can be a long-term process. Meanwhile, we must act in each of the areas where our institutions are being strangled and dismantled. We must bring to the attention of the whole population the state of injustice that is inherent in the Charter of the French Language, as it bears on each institutional area: our schools, our hospitals and old folks' homes, our municipalities, our employment in the public and private sectors.

Our schools: in other provinces, Section 23 1 (a) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms applies. The children of parents whose mother tongue is French have a right to French schools, no matter where the parents are from, anywhere on earth. But, in Quebec, That section of the Charter has not yet been proclaimed by the National Assembly. And so, while our schools are constantly losing their English-speaking students - there were 444 fewer in the entire school system in 1997-98 than there were in 1996-97 - we cannot accept in our schools English-speaking immigrants from the United States, the UK, the Caribbean islands, Pakistan or India, Hong Kong, or elsewhere. This is an intolerable double standard.

Secondly, the Canadian Charter ordains a far wider latitude for access to English schools than the Quebec Charter of the French Language will admit. The Commissioner of Official Languages, in his review Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, dealing with schools, has pointed out a discrepancy between the language of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the language of the Charter of the French Language, with the former broader:

Canadian Charter, Section 23 (2) "Citizens of Canada of whom any child has received or is receiving primary or secondary school instruction in English or French in Canada, have the right to have all their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in the same language."

The Charter of the French Language states: "73. The following children, at the request of one of their parents, may receive instruction in English: (1) a child whose father or mother is a Canadian citizen and received elementary instruction in English in Canada, provided that that instruction constitutes the major part of the elementary instruction he or she received in Canada."

Alliance Quebec has decided to back a Charter challenge to the narrower Quebec interpretation, since the federal Charter pre-empts Bill 101.

Thirdly, there is an arguable case that restrictions on the right of the child to attend one or another of the publicly supported educational systems violates the Quebec Civil Code and Quebec's obligations under the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is the argument made by Brent Tyler, and we are in the process of deciding whether we will back the court challenge that he is taking to have these restrictions declared null and void. The West Island chapter of Alliance Quebec has already raised more than \$5,200 in support of the challenge.

We must extend our campaign to other areas: for example, the present unreasonably high 50 per cent English population or clientele required for a hospital or municipality to have bilingual status should be lowered to 10 per cent. And it is a permanent scandal that Montreal is not recognized as a bilingual city merely because its population is less than 50 per cent English speaking.

We must press for individual rights and freedoms. But we must also press for the collective rights of an historic English-speaking community, or what I sometimes prefer to call a people, one of the several peoples of Quebec, the English-speaking people of Quebec, which has the rights of a people, that is the right to have its identity visible and recognized, and the right to develop its own institutions without their being hampered. That right in Quebec is now violated.

We must work to raise the consciousness of the English-speaking people of Quebec, which has long suffered from the Stockholm Syndrome. Columnists like Don Macpherson reserve their greatest venom for uppity Anglos who dare to raise their heads. Some form of principled assertiveness training is long overdue.

But, finally, we must win the battle in the consciences of our French-speaking fellow citizens. They are generally fair-minded and open. But, to reach them, we must make our case, argue our rights, openly, without defensiveness, without bending over backwards to demonstrate how "understanding" we are. And that means we must be much more up front, and bring our issues vigorously and effectively to public attention. The rights of English Quebec must be put on the public agenda and kept there, until the death sentence passed on us by Camille Laurin is finally lifted.