

Op-Ed by William Johnson
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Reed Scowen is full of ideas. Not only does he wave Quebec goodbye in his latest book. Now he wants the lion to lie down with the lamb so that we can “settle the language issue.” (“Consensus? What consensus? It’s time Liberals adopted language policy designed to keep anglos in Quebec,” The Gazette, Nov. 9) Does Scowen never learn?

What set him thinking was Jean Charest warning against trying to win lost language rights in the courts. Scowen quoted the Liberal leader: “We think the present situation is based on a consensus of 20 years. There’s a balance there and we should avoid disrupting the balance that we’ve had.”

Scowen disagrees with Charest that there is a consensus. And he doesn’t find a consensus between what he calls “the lambs and the hard-liners of our community.” Neither, he thinks, is on the right track.

So, fresh from settling the national unity issue by proposing to amputate Quebec, he now will settle the language issue by consulting those who intend to leave Quebec. Never mind those who plan to stay. We can’t be trusted. We are unrepresentative. Only those who leave point us in the right language path: whatever new policy would induce them to change their minds and stay.

And so, just as ejecting Quebec was his simple solution to national unity, there is an even simpler solution to the language problem.

“For the process to begin it is only necessary for a thoughtful member of the lamb lobby (Senator Joan Fraser would do very nicely) to pick up the phone and call William Johnson. They would agree to sit down together, with others, and draft a program which is based solely on the objectively measurable goal of satisfying those who are leaving the province.”

As with his proposal to extract Quebec like a rotted tooth, one wonders whether Scowen is not putting us on. A phone call from Joan Fraser? We shared thousands of futile phone calls when she was editor of The Gazette and I a columnist. We never agreed then. Why would we now?

Or why would those leaving Quebec change their minds, even if the sign law were to be changed – which it won’t? Neither Charest nor Louise Beaudoin will budge just

because Scowen got another revelation. One swallow doesn't make a spring. The winter of anglophobia is too deeply set in the two major political parties, it permeates the law and too many sectors of Quebec life, to melt in a twinkling because prospective expatriates were polled.

Scowen's confused thinking aptly expresses the confusion of the lambs, which Joan Fraser illustrated so brilliantly over so many years. None of them – certainly not Fraser – ever defended the rule of law and of constitutional government as the Supreme Court laid it down so clearly in last year's decision on secession. That must have come as a shock to all the lambs.

What Scowen illustrates, perhaps, is the despair of lucid lambs who have followed successive Quebec Liberal leaders to the slaughter and finally caught on. Whether it was Robert Bourassa, Claude Ryan, Bourassa again, Daniel Johnson or Charest, each chose nationalism over liberalism and opportunism over justice or rights.

How amusing it was to read Gretta Chambers' guest editorial in Sunday's Gazette. She wrung her hands over the victory of the Quebec and Canadian charters of rights and freedoms in the Lyon and the Wallrus case. Chambers pleaded for French having "pride of place." She was horrified that languages could be displayed equal.

"Striking down the predominance of French in public signage on the grounds that it provides for an unreasonable level of protection would be a denial of Quebec's need to protect its language at all."

Does Scowen seriously believe that a "consensus" with Chambers is possible, short of appeasement and surrender? I rather put my faith in English-speaking Quebecers who stay: at least 80 per cent of them, according to all the polls, believe in equal signs and free access to English schools.

Scowen was a dreamer before and he's a dreamer now. His big mistake is to dismiss as "hardliners" those who stand with the Supreme Court and the Quebec Court, with the people, with the consensus of liberal democratic countries. It is the nationalists and their appeasers who are the extremists.