

PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE SIGNS INITIATIVE, Sept. 23, 1998.

Will English in Quebec be language of a ghetto? That is what our major retailers seem to think. The habit of treating English like scum dies hard. But English is not "pollution". Enough of having to play hide and seek with the English language. There comes a time. There comes a time to stand up for our rights and for our language. And there comes a time to ask ourselves and all our French-speaking fellow citizens: are we truly part of Quebec and do you accept us as your equal fellow citizens? Or are we aliens in our own land?

On Sept 9, we held a press conference where we expressed our determination to rehabilitate the English language. Our language has been under attack for a generation, though it is one of the two official languages of Quebec and one of the two official languages of Canada. Two weeks ago, we asked commercial enterprises to put up signs in English to the extent permitted by the law. And we promised to come back today and report back to you, and tell you what we will do to regain our rights.

Le 9 septembre, nous avons lancé un débat de société. Nous avons demandé aux grandes entreprises commerciales de reconnaître notre présence au Québec et d'afficher en anglais comme le permet la loi, la Charte de la langue française. Aujourd'hui nous revenons devant vous pour poser une question existentielle: Est-ce que vous voulez vraiment de nous? Est-ce que vous nous acceptez comme vos concitoyens à part entière? Est-ce que vous acceptez notre présence, et la présence visible de notre langue à travers le Québec?

Ou voulez-vous plutôt nous voir disparaître? Voulez-vous cacher, occulter, notre présence derrière un masque de fer qui nous est cloué au visage, et qu'on appelle à tort et cruellement, "le visage français du Québec?" Nous, nous ne voulons rien enlever à personne. Mais nous voulons qu'on nous rende notre langue.

Our call for English on signs produced interesting results. The very next day, two officials from Eaton's dismissed our request. One said that the flagship downtown Eaton store would continue to have 100% French signs. Another said that Sainte-Catherine Street was a French market.

Moreover, The Gazette unearthed two letters sent to the Quebec government in March, 1993, in which both Eaton's and The Bay asked the minister responsible for the Charter of the French language, Claude Ryan, not to allow

English on commercial signs. The representatives of The Bay even claimed that allowing English signs would lead to "pollution." The two stores demanded that English be banished, which the Supreme Court of Canada said was incompatible with a free and democratic society, and the United Nations said violated International Law. Eaton's and The Bay had no shame.

Our campaign for the recognition of English has already produced some results. I'm told that, suddenly, English signs are sprouting in some stores where there were few or none before. And, among the worst offenders, both Eaton's and The Bay have given hints that they may put up a few English signs in their main downtown store on Sainte-Catherine Street.

David Crisp, Senior Vice-President of the Bay, wrote me yesterday: "We will be pursuing further consultation with customers, management and other retailers with respect to the current issues. We will take this into account in our continuing review of the situation for the Montreal store." He couldn't say clearly that he will put up English signs in The Bay stores, no. But some day he just might put up some English signs in one store.

George Kosich, president of Eaton, promised "a review of signage policy," and acknowledged: "Our downtown Montreal store, in fact, serves a large number of English-speaking customers, and our future policy should take that into account." But when I asked him on the phone yesterday for a clear commitment, he would give me nothing.

These vague reassurances come nowhere near meeting the legitimate demands we made in the name of many hundreds of thousands of English-speaking customers. These retailers still treat English as the language of an English ghetto, to be displayed only if they are certain that few of their French customers will see it. They continue to treat English as a dangerous or subversive language that must be severely restricted to only a few spots in Quebec. They act as though our demand that they put up English signs is an unspeakable outrage, an insolent ultimatum. They need to be taught a lesson in civics and civility. The customer is always right.

The Bay and Eaton's both need their consciousness raised. Eaton's, for example, prefers to risk an economic boycott and possible bankruptcy rather than make a clear commitment to post English signs to the extent the law permits. Listen to Eaton's President's wishy-washy language in a press release issued yesterday: "We will therefore pursue our consultations with customers, our management team and industry colleagues to determine what should be done under the circumstances," Mr. Kosich wrote.

Since he wants to consult his customers, I'm sure that he will appreciate our contribution. Tomorrow, at 6 pm, we will rally in Phillips Square, we will walk to the downtown's Eaton's store which is supposedly in a "French market," and we will pass on a bit of advice: PUT ENGLISH SIGNS IN YOUR STORES.

Mr. Kosich, just to help you accelerate your review of your signage policy, we will be there Thursday, we will return Friday at 6 pm, and we will be there Saturday at 11.. Our message to your customers will be: do you really want to give your money to a company that has denied your language, your history, your identity for these several years, and even petitioned the Quebec government in 1993 not to allow English on signs? We will picket other Eaton's stores until you have finally, at last, belatedly caught the message: WE WANT ENGLISH ON SIGNS.

We are beginning to catch their attention. It's a start. But they have a long way to go before they come close to appreciating what an injustice they have perpetrated against the English-speaking customers over the past few years. They should apologize. Instead they arrogantly refuse to make any clear and broad commitment towards English in Quebec. They will learn in time if you teach them the meaning of customer power.

Oui, nous allons picketer devant le magasin Eaton sur la rue Sainte-Catherine demain à 18 heures pour obtenir la reconnaissance de notre langue, pour qu'elle puisse sortir de l'obscurité et s'étaler au grand jour. Notre anglais est québécois, et il est temps que tous reconnaissent sa légitimité.

We address an appeal to the consciences of all Canadians. We call on all Canadians, right across this country, to speak to their local Eaton's store and to The Bay to ask them to show a little respect for the English language in Quebec. If Canadians unite in defense of the English language here where it is under the attack of extremists, anglophobes and short-sighted retail store executives, we will win, at last, the public recognition that we deserve. Customer power can at least make them take notice. So we ask you to dial Eaton's complaint line: 1-800-267-3286.

Tomorrow, we start by picketing Eaton's. But our campaign has only just begun. We ask all English-speaking Quebecers to stand up for their rights and make known their indignation to Eaton's and The Bay. Then we will be on to the other stores who spurn the English language, until English is once again recognized as one of the two official languages of Quebec.

Notre anglais est québécois.