

Barbara Kay: In Marois' Montreal, the sound of English becomes an offence

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I have lived in Montreal for almost 50 years. I arrived as a young bride just when the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) was beginning its campaign of terror in the service of an independent Quebec. I was pregnant with my second child when British diplomat James Cross and cabinet minister Pierre Laporte were kidnapped and Laporte killed.

During that terrible period, my Toronto family, appalled by news reports of bombs going off in symbolic anglo and federal sites – mailboxes, train station, the stock exchange – and fearful for our safety, kept wondering why we didn't flee to Toronto. My husband was in the financial sector and could easily have had a job there.

But like everyone else we knew, we considered the FLQ a complete aberration from ordinary, peace-loving québécois, a kind of political virus that would pass. It did, with the help of the War Measures Act, which ruffled the feathers of liberal pundits, but made it easy to round up the miscreants quickly and suffocate the violent branch of the separatist movement.

I witnessed the rise to power of the Parti Québécois and, with their first victory in 1976, the great exodus of anglos, including three of my best friends, whose toddlers played with mine every day. Once again we weighed our options. And once again, partly because the PQ leader, René Lévesque was a true democrat, partly because it would have been a cruelty to take their grandchildren away from my aging in-laws, and partly because we simply loved Montreal above all other cities in Canada, we stayed.

Then there was the 1980 referendum. It was a tense period, but we had Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau on our side. Say what you will about Trudeau, on this file he shone. He faced down the xenophobic elements in the separatist movement with the contempt they deserved. The referendum was soundly defeated 60-40. A wave of relief surged through the province.

It didn't last. The undemocratic Bill 101 made it clear that the English language was to be tolerated in Quebec, but only in a dhimmi capacity in this nation of two official languages. We swallowed that because we believed that once the French language was made secure, separatist fever would die down and we could get on with economic recovery from the devastation wrought by the referendum and the flight of people and capital.

The nightmare of the second 1995 referendum traumatized the anglo community, and the rest of Canada too. This time there was no champion on the federalist side. Jean Chrétien and his government were deer in the headlights. Lucien Bouchard's demagoguery mesmerized the electorate. Only the threat of partition by the Cree in northern Quebec and passionately principled leaders of the anglo community prevented a separatist win. But by such a narrow margin that resentment and revanchism continued to flare for years by those who felt "cheated" of their victory by "money and the ethnics," as drunken buffoon Jacques Parizeau put it on conceding the referendum's defeat.

The trauma of the referendum cast a depression over the province for years. The passionate anglo leaders decamped in disgust. Another exodus, this time of anglo children – most of them ironically now bilingual – starting careers and who had a choice, and voted with their feet. They now live in Toronto, Vancouver, New York and Los Angeles. Those of us who stayed are those who didn't have options, or for personal reasons elected to get on with our lives and roll with the punches.

Things got better. The new generation of francophones were culturally confident and cosmopolitan in outlook. We thought separatism was dead and buried. But it is back with a vengeance. In order to win the last election in Quebec, PQ chief Pauline Marois knew she had only one option: to rally her anglophobic base. During the campaign she encouraged fear-based hostility to the English language in francophones. Now it was not enough that French was the official language in education and business and services; now anglos were criticized because it was not the "language of use" in their private lives. English was now an ugly thing *in itself*. It was an insult to the ears of francophones.

Yes, Pauline Marois got her election victory, even though it is a minority government, for which we federalists have pronounced ourselves – pathetically, over and over – grateful. But that is not going to be enough to drain the toxins this campaign has spewed into the air we breathe. Poisoned air is not good for grievance-collectors with poor impulse control. And now we are seeing the consequences of this irresponsible appeal to the dark side of human nature.

I have often expressed opinions that did not sit well with many québécois. But never before in all the years I have lived here did I ever fear a personal physical attack for what I thought. Today I am astonished and ashamed to say that here in Canada's founding city, I rationally fear a physical attack for the language in which I express myself.

On the evening of September 22, Mr. G., a 17- year old young man was walking with his cousins in St. Léonard, an east- end neighbourhood in Montreal. They were speaking English. A young adult male confronted them and said, in French, “You’re not allowed to speak English here.” When the cousins attempted to move on, the thug attacked Mr. G with two punches to the face. The group then fled to avoid further violence.

This was not the first incident of this kind. On September 12, 48- year old Alex Montreuil was at the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal for a CT scan. He went to the hospital cafeteria and ordered a sandwich. He says he explained to the woman making the sandwiches – in English – that he was violently allergic to tomatoes, and asked that she change the gloves she was wearing before making his sandwich in case there were traces of tomato on them from precious handling. She complied.

Montreuil was eating his sandwich in the company of a friend when a 30- something woman approached their table. According to Montreuil, she screamed in French, “Here we speak French, not English.” Montreuil says he responded, “In my city, in my country, I can speak the language of my choice.”

The argument escalated and the woman withdrew for a few minutes. When she returned, she threw a tomato sandwich at Montreuil’s face. Within moments, his face and body were swelling dangerously. The woman was arrested and may be charged with criminal assault.

We don’t know if the woman in the latter case was mentally disturbed, but it would be politically troubling even so, for mentally disturbed people take their “reasons” for their paranoia from vibes in the general atmosphere.

In any case, I actually can’t think of any time before Marois’ election campaign where, as in these two cases, private citizen A has criminally assaulted citizen B for speaking English to citizen C. The scenario suggests that English is not only a dhimmi language, but that it is some kind of virus, that can not only infect a person who is obliged to speak it, but can spread through the air to bystanders. I have a bad feeling about these incidents. I do not believe they are freak one- offs. I think they are trickledown effects from the licence Pauline Marois gave to francophones to feel offended by hearing English, and may be harbingers of worse to come.

René Lévesque and Pierre Trudeau would have been horrified by these incidents. They would have held a press conference immediately to denounce them as hate crimes. Pauline Marois is made of different stuff from her predecessors. She and her minions are an old guard, who know they represent the past, not the future, but desperate people seize on desperate means. I fear we are entering a new dark age in Quebec. I cannot summon my wonted optimism that this time reason will prevail.

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