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BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM IN CANADA
AND SOUTH AFRICA

By

DR. E.G. MALHERBE.

(Rough notes used in an address to the
Witwatersrand Branch of the Institute
on 2nd April, 1968.)

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2nd April, 1968.

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Statistical:

Whereas over 60% of the South African White population can speak both the official languages, English and Afrikaans, only 12% of the Canadian population speak both English and French, Canada's official languages. 67.4% speak English only and 19.1% French only.

The French are far more bilingual than the English; 30% of those who have French as a mother tongue speak both French and English whereas the percentage is only 4 in the case of those with English as mother tongue.

Of all the Provinces, the Province of Quebec is the most bilingual - the percentage for the total of Quebec being 25.5%. If one takes the City of Montreal by itself the percentage is 37% and if one excludes Montreal from the Province of Quebec the proportion is 18%.

New Brunswick comes next with 19%, then Ontario with 8%. The further one goes West the lower the percentage of Canadians who can speak both English and French. In Alberta it is 4%, in British Columbia it is 3½%.

Fifty years ago the percentage of the White South Africans who could speak both English and Afrikaans was only 42%; today it has risen up to 66%. The main reason, apart from the deliberate and official school policy, for the high percentage of bilingualism in South Africa lies in the large extent of geographic and social interspersions of the two languages in the community. It is not like Canada where both geography and religion divide the French from the English Canadians.

It is a moot point whether language or ethnic origin is a greater dividing factor than religion in Canada. For example, when a French Catholic was asked why he did not like his Irish Catholic neighbour, he replied, "That Irishman is still a Britisher and I don't like the British".

In South Africa there were usually more English unilinguals than Afrikaans unilinguals. 30 years ago 19% of the population could speak only English as against 16% who could speak only Afrikaans. Today, however, the position is becoming reversed; the latest Census figures show that the percentage of Afrikaans-speaking people who could not speak any English rose during the last 10 years from 11% to 18%; the percentage of unilingual English persons in South Africa remained constant at 15% during the same period.

Political top-doggism always gives a very great boost to the language of the group that is top dog. The British element in Canada has often been impatient with the French and have asked "Why don't they all consider themselves Canadians first and treat their ancestry as something that belongs to the past?".

A question of Attitude:

As we saw above, the English are far less bilingual in Canada than the French are. The English as a rule are very loath to study other languages. John Milton said that this inability to speak foreign languages was due to the prevailing cold weather in England which precluded people from opening their mouths properly when they spoke! I find that in the case of the English it is largely a matter of attitude. It is a well known fact that a feeling of superiority or snobbery acts as a handicap for English speaking peoples in acquiring another language. While the Americans tell the world that they are the greatest nation on earth, the British simply assume that they are.

Renier, in his amusing book "The English, Are They Human?", said that whereas the English considered themselves superior to the rest of the world, the Scots only considered themselves superior to the English!

Two Cultures or One?

The question has been asked: "Is Canada one country consisting of two nations or one nation consisting of two cultures or one nation having two languages?". The English speaking Canadian feels that the crux of the whole issue is that there are people who look upon themselves as French Canadians when they should be looking on themselves as Canadians merely who speak French.

The question has also been asked: "Is there such a person as a Canadian?". Similarly Calpin wrote a book some years ago "There are no South Africans".

Technically and legally we are all South African citizens. When we travel abroad, whether we are White, Indian, Coloured or Bantu, we travel under South African passports as South African citizens. Technically and legally, therefore, these are all South Africans.

Even looking at the White population only it is an interesting point on which to speculate, namely whether one can develop a culture that is peculiarly South African in the presence of two vernaculars, English and Afrikaans. I personally do not think that this possibility is entirely excluded if one considers, in the first place, that these two media of communication are very closely interspersed and, in the second place, that a country's culture is something broader than mere language.

A Way of Life:

In this respect, the much-quoted Flemish slogan "De Taal is gansch het volk" is an obvious exaggeration. The culture of a country consists essentially of a way of life. This embodies not only language but all forms of artistic expression prevalent amongst the people of a country. It is reflected in its architecture, its visual art, its music, its drama, even in its sport and the way in which its human beings associate with one another. It embodies their customs, prejudices, etc.

Though the South African culture contains traditional elements from countries such as Holland and England, it has in the course of years developed its own way of life which is different from that of both those countries. This way of life, as well as its languages and literature, has been affected also by contact with the indigenous population of Southern Africa which gives South African culture an entirely unique flavour. It is therefore absurd for anyone of the two linguistic groups to claim the monopoly of South African culture. Rather than regarding the presence of two linguistic media as a handicap, one should look upon it as an opportunity for personal and national enrichment, which cannot but enhance a truly South African culture. The area which English and Afrikaans speaking South Africans have in common is far greater than the areas in which they differ.

It is when one has lived in Holland for a time that one realises how far even the Afrikaner has developed away from the way of life of the Hollanders. Similarly the way of life of the average English speaking South African is quite different from that of the way of life of an Englishman in England, or a Scotsman in Scotland or a Welshman in Wales. The question therefore is, "What makes a Canadian a Canadian?"

Meaning of the word 'Nation':

The word "nation" is tantalizingly ambiguous. What really do we understand when we hear politicians particularly speaking of the South African nation - Die Suid-Afrikaanse Volk? Or for that matter the Canadian "Nation"?

The word "nation" is an old word and has gathered much moss with the lapse of centuries. As derived from the Latin "natio" it meant birth or race and signified a tribe or social grouping based on real or fancied community of blood and possessed, presumably of unity of language. Later it was used in certain mediaeval universities to designate a division of students for voting purposes according to their place of birth. Since the 17th century nation has been employed by jurists and publicists to describe the population of a sovereign political state, regardless of any racial or linguistic unity and this description still enjoys general sanction. Not only the relatively homogeneous peoples of Denmark and Portugal and called nations, but the polyglot people of the Austrian Empire until the close of the

First World War were collectively called the Austrian or the Austro-Hungarian Nation and the bilingual Belgians and the trilingual Swiss are still called nations. In the United States a special usage obtains for here the word is frequently applied to the whole body of the people coming under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government.

It was in part to atone for the abuse of the word nation that the word nationality was coined in the early part of the 19th century and speedily incorporated into most European languages. Thenceforth, while nation continued to denote the citizens of a sovereign political state, nationality was more exactly used in reference to a group of persons speaking the same language and observing the same customs. They are members of a people who cherish common historical traditions and who constitute, or think they constitute, a distinct cultural society. In this sense, a nationality may exist without political unity, that is, without an organised sovereign state of its own, and vice versa, a political state may embrace several nationalities, though the tendency has been pronounced in modern times for every self-conscious nationality to aspire to political unity and independence. A nationality which is not politically independent and united is metaphorically styled as "oppressed" or "subject" or even "enslaved" nationality. A nationality by acquiring political unity and sovereign independence becomes a nation, or to avoid the use of the troublesome word "nation", establishes a "national state". A national state is always based on nationality but a nationality may exist without a national state. A state is essentially political and involves territorial boundaries. A nationality is primarily cultural and only incidentally political.

Die "Boerenasie":

The Afrikaans equivalent of the word "nation", namely "nasie" or "volk", seemed to add to the confusion of thought, particularly when used like "die Afrikaner volk" or "die Boerenasie". I was particularly struck by the confused way in which these terms were bandied about at the recent congress of SABRA, which I attended at Stellenbosch.

There I came across, for example, the following claim by an eminent SABRA member who is a University professor when he pleaded for the segregation of all the ethnic Bantu groups into separate Bantustans. Then he added that "the Afrikaner volk also wants its own territory, that is, the Republic of South Africa. For that the Afrikaner is prepared to sacrifice even his life if that should be necessary".

He was obviously thinking of a White Republic of South Africa but he completely ignored the fact that in this Republic there is a very strong White element which is English speaking. What about them?

Following this line of thought to its logical conclusion, one may ask: Should the English also now, because of a different language, stake a separate territorial claim? Or should they

just forget about their language and merge their cultural identity into one White group which will be known as the Afrikaner Volk inhabiting the Republic of South Africa - the Non-whites presumably living in separate Bantustans and the Coloureds in a Colouredstan and the Indians in an Indianstan?

Two Countries in Search of an Identity:

Like South Africa, Canada is a country in search of an identity. Though obviously in South Africa the situation is much more complicated by the multi-racial nature of its population, it has not yet reached that intense awareness of an impending cultural crisis which is at present causing so much concern in Canada.

So seriously did the Canadian Government regard this sense of crisis that it appointed a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963 "to enquire into and report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution". The Commission was further enjoined to seek common denominators which underlie the two cultures and upon which they might hope to establish some degree of Canadian identity.

The constitution of the Canadian population can be described in two ways, (a) according to ethnic origin which is traced only on the paternal side. According to this, 44% are British, 30% French and 26% "other". (b) According to mother-tongue which is as follows: English 58%, French 28%, "Other" 14%. The main groups under "other" are 3% German, 2% Dutch, 2% Italian and 1% Indian and Eskimo.

The Royal Commission brought out its first report in February 1965 as a preliminary statement of the problem. This was followed in October 1967 by a volume which deals specifically with the official languages and the rights which these languages should enjoy on three levels, namely the Federal level, the Provincial level and the local level.

In what follows I shall try to give an outline of some of the points made in the evidence before the Royal Commission and also my own impressions while recently visiting Canada, as to the reasons why the separatist movement in Quebec is looked upon as a threat to the solidarity of the Canadian nation.

In order to celebrate its 100th Anniversary, Canada staged in Montreal one of the best organised Expositions ever held anywhere in the world. One of the main purposes of this Exposition was to make not only the Canadians themselves but also the rest of the world realise the tremendous potentiality of this vast country which is larger in area than China, has more oil reserves than the rest of the world put together, mineral resources few countries can rival and a standard of living second

only to that of the United States.

As one who has travelled right through Canada on several occasions during the last 20 years, I am impressed by the fact that the Canadians are modest almost to a fault. Also that the jokes they tell about themselves have a touch of bitterness behind them, for example, one came across remarks such as the following: "We have had access to American know-how, British political wisdom and French culture and we have ended up with British know-how, French political wisdom and American culture"..... "The symbol of Canada is the beaver, an industrious rodent whose destiny it is to provide hats to warm brains better than his own" "A Canadian is a man who hasn't had an offer from the U.S.A."!

The Canadian Culture Crisis:

According to many reliable observers, Canada is going through the most critical period of its history since Confederation. They believe that there is a crisis in the sense that Canada has come to a time when decisions must be taken and developments must occur leading, either to its breakup or to a new set of conditions for its future existence. It is not clear whether the crisis will be short or long. The conviction, however, is that it is there; the signs of danger seem to be many and serious.

The ways in which important public and private institutions now operate strongly dissatisfy a very significant part of the Canadian population, while the other part remains largely indifferent to this situation or does not even know of its existence.

For most of the French speaking Canadians the questions of language and culture do not occur in the abstract. They are rooted in the experiences of daily life, in jobs, in meetings, in correspondence with public and private corporations, in the armed forces. They are inseparably connected with the social, economic and political institutions which frame the existence of a people and which should satisfy the many needs and aspirations. The opinions we heard were often the result of ordinary individual and collective experiences, hence our conviction that they can hardly be changed by simple appeals to abstract ideas like "National Unity".

It seemed to us that the dissatisfaction and the sense of revolt came from aspects of reality rather than from doctrines that had been preached.

I came across a number of English speaking Canadians, many of whom expressed sentiments of goodwill, who seemed to have no realisation of the daily experiences that cause the discontent among so many of their French speaking fellow citizens. Nor do most understand the underlying trend toward the increasing autonomy of Quebec and the strengthening of the belief among her people that she is now building herself into a distinct form of nationhood with full control of all her social and economic institutions. What is grasped is frequently rejected, thus there exists a deep gulf: with unawareness on one side and

strongly rooted feeling on the other.

The whole social body appears to be affected; the crisis has reached a point where there is a danger that the will of the people to go on as a nation may begin to fail.

It is, however, quite possible that the danger may be averted because most of the people in Canada actually love Canada and, once they are aware of the dangers threatening it, they will apply themselves to removing the causes. Nevertheless, the crisis appears to us to be an undeniable fact.

Old Conflicts:

Canada has lived through other and less profound crises before which have brought to the surface very different concepts about the country held by French speaking and English speaking Canadians. Memories of these past events seem very much alive, especially in French Canada. Thus a sense of grievance can accumulate with each successive conflict, no matter how it has been resolved.

There are obvious parallels in our South African history.

Canada was, of course, born out of warfare between the "two founding peoples", as it was born also out of the White man's imposition of his culture upon the original Indians and Eskimos. From the Indian point of view, French and English both have the same title to the land, namely by conquest.

Quebec tends to feel that the French were settlers and the English invaders. These ancient battles have not ceased on both sides to motivate present behaviour.

Conflicts since Confederation are well known, although viewed from totally different aspects by the two main participants.

Conscription in 1917 and again in 1942 appeared to many in English Canada as a necessity for a nation committed to victory in crucial wars, but in Quebec it seemed to drag a peaceful people into conflicts of prime concern only to those of British descent.

Here too we find an interesting parallel with the Nationalist's objection to South Africa's entering the last two world wars.

We find the following synthetic opinions recorded in the memory of the people, for example: "The French Canadians are never satisfied", or "The English Canadians will never understand us". These half-resolved old conflicts are appearing again, this time in a less spectacular but nevertheless deep-rooted crisis which may (over and above anything that is new) be the product and consummation of all the past resentments. The previous conflicts did not seriously threaten the fundamentals of the State. The crisis today is of a different order; there

has never been the feeling, except perhaps among a few individuals and groups, that the fundamental conditions for the existence of the Canadian people were in jeopardy.

What is at stake is the very fact of Canada. What kind of country will it be? Will it continue to exist? These questions are not matters for theoreticians only, they are posed by groups of human beings. And other groups, by refusing to ask themselves the same questions, actually increase the seriousness of the situation.

Majorities and Minorities:

The chief protagonists, whether they are entirely conscious of it or not, are French speaking Quebec and English speaking Canada, and it seems to us to be no longer the traditional conflict between a majority and a minority. It is rather a conflict between two majorities, that which is a majority in all Canada and that which is a majority in the entity of Quebec.

That is to say, French speaking Quebec acted for a long time as though it had at least accepted the idea of being merely a privileged "ethnic minority". Today, the kind of opinion we met so often in Quebec regards that province practically as an autonomous society and expects her to be recognised as such.

This attitude goes back to a fundamental expectation for French Canada, that is, to be an equal partner with English speaking Canada. If this idea is found to be impossible because such equality is not believed in or not acceptable, we believe the sense of deception will bring decisive consequences. An important element in French speaking Quebec is already tempted to go it alone.

Much has been done already to appease the feelings of the French in Quebec. Nevertheless, in spite of the importance of these adjustments, it seems clear from the opinions we heard spring from attitudes too deeply rooted for them to have been modified in any significant or permanent way.

Quebec: The Principle Sources of Unrest.

According to many French speaking people, the principal institutions in the country are frustrating their desire to live their lives fully as French Canadians. This situation, they said, prevails even in Quebec itself inside the economic institutions of the Province, such as a plant in the locality managed by English speaking people which was carrying on its business as though it were in "colonial territory" and was preventing the majority of its employees from working in their mother tongue once they reached a certain level. The English speaking managerial group, often a tiny proportion of the population, felt no need to speak French and, as a result, rarely bothered to learn it. These people freely admitted that this sort of situation was not new and that, on the contrary, it has always existed in Quebec, but they added that they could no longer allow it to continue.

All this has deep meaning and brings us straight to the centre of the problem.

Why suddenly, when apparently nothing has occurred to upset the traditional order of things, have more and more people decided that they can no longer tolerate the same shackles which are nonetheless a century old?

Speaking of the serialised television novels in Montreal and of the "morbid" side of a large part of French Canadian literature one man from Chicoutimi concluded "We now have literary heroes who are 'crushed'. The reason for this is that we are a society of 'crushed' people, we are not yet a developed nation."

Many of the younger French businessmen seemed to consider a status of economic inferiority to be incompatible with the fact of numerical majority in Quebec. We find therefore in Quebec a numerical majority which is said to have been pushed around and a society which is 'crushed'.

For an outsider it is not very easy to understand the reasons for all these grievances, because after all, French Quebec has more than 4 million inhabitants; it has its legal institutions including its own Civil Code and its political institutions, which a number of people sum up in the expression "The State of Quebec". The powers of Quebec are considerable; they enable the French population to exercise an important influence over its own economic and social life and to manage education. It has thousands of French schools, both elementary and secondary, normal schools, classical colleges and three French Universities, not to mention a system of technical education. It has tens of thousands of teachers, nevertheless their control of political institutions and the powers they exercise seemed insufficient to a large majority of the people in Quebec.

This is not all: Quebec has an autonomous network of social institutions, a system of hospitalisation, trade unions, voluntary associations of many kinds, and so on. It owns or influences a complex of mass media of communication by which it expresses itself in its own language: 11 daily newspapers, about 175 weekly newspapers, 120 periodicals, 46 radio stations, 13 television stations, the French network of the CBC and of the private stations whose principal production centre is Montreal, and so forth.

Lastly, it has a considerable number of economic institutions and, though with certain notable exceptions, such as Hydro Quebec or the Cassetta Populaire, i.e. the Credit Unions, these concerns are rather modest in size. Furthermore, Quebec participates through its position in the North American Continent in the general commercial, financial and industrial life of which it forms an integral part but its participation appears to it to be very small; and it is here, above all, that the shoe pinches.

A Life Apart:

Contrary to the idea of many English speaking Canadians, three out of four French Canadians in Quebec, that is to say a body of people numbering more than 3,000,000 individuals, do not know a word of English. Therefore for them and undoubtedly also for a great many more who claim to be bilingual daily life, (except in large business above a certain level), is carried on exclusively in French to such an extent that the English speaking tourist for instance, has great difficulty in making himself understood.

It is in these completely French areas that people have been rebelling against the obligation of learning English in order to reach positions of authority. It is apparently because that obligation in areas like these seem neither natural nor logical, since the local way of life is French at every level except one, namely in the higher echelons of big business. Their life is lived amongst French Canadians and it seems astonishing or "scandalous" to them that "only" English speaking people are to be found in managerial positions where French Canadians are so often noticeable by their absence.

Contacts with the French Speaking World:

The general level of education of the population of French Quebec is relatively low; at least, lower than that of the English speaking section of Canada. However, with the advance of higher education amongst the French Canadians they are discovering a world which is French speaking outside the boundaries of Canada. This has a reassuring affect and brings them promise of valuable cultural enrichment. They are becoming conscious of being a part of a much larger cultural world. Some of them are thus having the experience of a world wide French community, bringing them into contact with Europe, Africa and Asia. Nevertheless the links with France have thusfar been tenuous, much less than what one would have expected, so that even the pronouncements of de Gaulle during his recent visit did not have the sudden effect of getting French Canadians to fall in love with France, either economically or culturally. Their economic links with the United States of America were in any event much stronger.

The Separatists:

By their own admission a rather small numerical minority, the Separatists nevertheless exercise an influence in French Canadian society which is proportionately higher than their number. They find their membership chiefly in urban centres, have many students, artists, intellectuals and professionals in their ranks and belong to every political philosophy.

These Separatists draw their arguments from the old Nationalist arsenal except for their principal proposition. A well-treated minority, the French Canadians are nonetheless a minority. In order to gain control of their destiny they must

decide in favour of the Sovereign State of Quebec in which they will at last be a majority. In the eyes of a Separatist the double equation Majority = Imperial Rule, Minority = Colony, is no metaphor but a strict statement of fact. It means that in Canada the great political and economic decisions are taken outside the French Canadian nation, which has to go along with them. The minority must therefore be "de-colonised" so that it may be freed from its status as a "slave nation".

The Economic Issue:

Even with an independent Quebec or a semi-independent Quebec the basic fact will remain and this is that French is part of North America. It can opt out in theory but not in practice.

When the French speaking nationalists are told this their reply is that they won't submit to economic blackmail from the "Anglos". Theirs is a reasonable position, perhaps, because no one wants to live by bread alone these days.

However, there are rumours of a capital outflow from Quebec. If this trend persists and the closing of Expo has ended the economic boom, the situation could get ugly with Separatists resorting to the sort of violence they perpetrated three years ago. Their scape goats would be the English and Jewish businessmen who have allegedly put French Canada into colonial bondage to the Almighty Buck.

The Common Elements:

In spite of present differences in outlook, Canadians of different origins have much in common. They share many facets of a great common European tradition and they maintain many connections across the Atlantic. They have lived together for 200 years. Geography and conditions in life in the northern half of North America have a common influence on them; they join in a common love for their land as such. Abroad, English speaking and French speaking Canadians have often found that they have more in common with each other than with citizens of other countries. All Canadians are members of a modern technologically advanced society, with all that this implies with problems and opportunities. The advances taking place in Quebec, while they may increase the sense of competition between the French and English speaking Canadians, may also give them more to talk about together than ever in the past.

Canada is a country of tremendous potentiality. It seems, however, that current problems between the peoples of Canada are impeding great advances. If a solution to the dilemma posed by duality can be found, I am sure it will release immense energy and creative power; vitality could then come from the very differences and tensions among Canadians. Then the potentialities of the two cultures, English and French speaking, with the enriching contributions from those of other origins, each working in its own way for common purposes, could be enormous.

A Change of Attitude:

What seems to be urgently required is a change in attitude on both the French and the English speaking sides. Then, too, the Canadians should examine more closely the concept of democracy itself. Too often democracy has been reduced to the simple game of majority versus minority. Some English speaking citizens invoked the "law of the majority" as though they were brandishing a threatening weapon. Some French speaking people, having complained bitterly of the consequences of this "law", expressed their desire to make use of it to their own advantage in a more or less independent Quebec.

What appears necessary is that English speaking Canadians as a whole must come to recognise the existence of the vigorous French speaking society within Canada and to find out more about the aspirations, frustrations and achievements of French speaking Canadians in Quebec and outside it. They must come to understand what it means to be a member of a minority or of a smaller partner people and to be ready to give that minority assurances which are unnecessary for a majority. More than a century ago Sir John A. MacDonalld wrote to an English speaking friend: "Treat them as a nation and they will act as a free people generously do; call them a faction and they become factious."

On the other hand, it seems to us that the French speaking Canadians for their part, must be ready to respond positively if there are to be truly significant developments towards a better partnership. It would be necessary for French speaking Quebecers to restrain their present tendency to concentrate so intensely on their own affairs and to look so largely inward. Their attitude has been typified by the man who prayed:

"God bless me and my wife,
Our son John and his wife,
Us four and no more."