

# the HERALD Outlook

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## Leaving them speechless



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Stewart MacLeod  
Thomson News Service

Pardon the pun, but there seems to be something about the Quebec language issue that renders people speechless. In fact, few of our major political leaders are saying anything - in either official language.

In the week following the arson fire at the headquarters of Alliance Quebec, about the only influential voice to condemn the attack came, ironically, from the Saint-Jean Baptiste Society. Imagine that!

Not a word from Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa, not a word from Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. And scarcely a word from any members of their governments.

If the prime minister can arrange to send out birthday cards to the over-90 set during his holidays, surely a little condemnation of a fire would not be beyond his reach. Same goes for Mr. Bourassa.

It would be more understandable if Alliance Quebec were a radical, trouble-making organization. But it's not. As a voice of anglophone Quebecers, the Alliance has frequently been criticized from within for being too moderate and too accepting.

An English-language Montreal columnist recently complained that the province's anglophones were effectively without a voice because the Alliance thought the best approach to the language issue was "being nice."

NO VOICE

Yet, when vandals torched the headquarters of this entirely moderate organization, causing some \$200,000 damage, the official silence was almost deafening. Not even the usual "deplorable" comment in the first week.

It's true the Alliance didn't think much of Premier Bourassa's response to the Supreme Court judgement that Quebec's language laws violated the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The organization

was very critical of the government for invoking the "notwithstanding clause" to continue banning the use of English on outside signs.

But the statements from Alliance President Royal Orr could not have been more conciliatory. To the premier, he said, "You see, Mr. Bourassa, we have a conviction which you evidently do not share: that the vast majority of Quebecers have confidence in the future of the French language and culture and are convinced that the protection of that language and culture can be assured without wiping other languages, and specifically English, off the linguistic face of this province."

NOT WARRANTED

It's difficult to see why anyone, even extremists, would be offended by the Alliance - except that it represents anglophone Quebecers.

Yet, Mr. Orr says his organization has received hundreds of threats since the Supreme Court handed down its decision.

After the fire, the police arson squad wasn't called in for three days. It's official policy not to pay overtime to the squad on holiday weekends unless injuries are involved.

But, considering the sensitive nature of this case, one would think exceptions should have been made. Anyway, the controversy over the investigation made it even more imperative that there be some reassurances, or condemnations, from government leaders.

Mr. Orr virtually begged for it. "You cannot remain silent when Alliance Quebec's efforts to advocate a solution based on the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms are described in newspaper advertisements and elsewhere as 'making war with words of peace.'"

"You cannot remain silent, because silence is acquiescence."

Yes, we understand the extreme sensitivity of the language issue and the reluctance of political leaders to say anything that might mildly annoy anyone. But what we're dealing with here is arson, a criminal offence.

And surely a head of government doesn't require a week to ponder over this before declaring that such an act is simply, shall we say, not nice.

SNAFU® by Bruce Beattie



"The only heart-attack risk is asking some kid how much he'd charge to do this."

## Two's a Crowd

By BILL BUTTLE



"It will not upset the fragile ecological balance!"

## No mind for business



Your  
Business  
Diane Maley  
Thomson News Service

A whole series of recent surveys have left educators, parents and potential employers wringing their hands over the hopeless ignorance of today's students.

There was the survey in which far too many young people could not point out Canada or the United States on a map. Then there was the one that showed most students could not read or write well enough to understand the back of a cereal box.

But the one that has business up in arms now is the survey that shows most US students don't know what profit is. Imagine that.

This is worrisome, indeed, for how can we keep the capitalist economy rolling when up-and-coming capitalists don't know what profit is? But the solution some are proposing may be problematic: educators want to teach economics in elementary school.

As we all know, economics is not a science; it can scarcely be called an art, although artfulness is needed in economic forecasting. Given its imperfections, what can teachers teach children about economics that will be supported by the way things work in the real world?

NOT SIMPLE

Take profit, for example. Only a third of American students surveyed knew profit was revenue minus costs. But things are not so simple. A clever accountant with a sharp pencil can turn a profit into a loss and a loss into a profit. What are children to make of that?

The survey, sponsored by the Joint Council on Economic Education, covered 8,206 US students in Grades 11 and 12. While one of the test's designers urged school districts to introduce economics in elementary schools, this seems to me to be a bit of an overreaction. Surely high school is soon enough

for students to find out how precarious the world order is. Why cause younger children unnecessary anxiety?

The revelation about the state of economic knowledge in US high schools follows earlier ones about the dismal state of American students' knowledge of writing, geography, foreign languages, science and math - all basic elements of a liberal education.

Other bits of economic wisdom on which the students did not score well: Less than 40 per cent knew gross national product is the market value of the nation's output of final goods and services.

WHAT'S A DEFICIT?

A really scary finding: Only 45 per cent realized government deficits are caused by the government's spending more than it takes in taxes. No wonder North America is drowning in deficits.

Finally, less than half of the students polled knew that economic demand for a product is how much of the product people are willing and able to buy at a certain price.

In response to the survey, Paul Volcker, former US central banker, uttered dark warnings about its implications for the country's economic well-being. A basic understanding of economics is necessary for a country to be effective in the increasingly competitive global economy, he said.

He then confessed that he did not study economics in high school.

A basic understanding of profit and loss, revenue and expenses, surplus and deficit, would benefit high school students, and perhaps even those in lower grades as well. It would be useful for students to know what the money supply is, how interest rates are set and when the government should rein in fiscal policy.

But economic theory is a less useful thing. Monetarists, Keynesians and supply-siders should be left with Adam Smith and Karl Marx for later years, when students are better equipped for the potentially devastating knowledge that no one really knows what is going on.

## Haunted past



Staff  
Comment

Brian MacLeod

He may be gone but the ghost of Rene Levesque still haunts Quebec politics.

The dauntless French rights activist, philosopher, outspoken antagonist and angry political leader, still has a firm grip on the reins of the Quebec political scene.

And the irony of it all is that it's Quebec Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa who is haunted by the separatist former Parti Quebecois leader.

And Bourassa is responding in kind.

Premier Bourassa admits there is some "social tension" over the language issue in the province, but adds that Quebec is not in a state of crisis.

Perhaps not. But Premier Bourassa himself, surely is in a state of crisis.

Only a man with the driven, almost obsessional goal of advancing the rights of French-speaking Quebecers could possibly justify in his own mind overriding a Supreme Court of Canada ruling, in order to prohibit English-speaking business owners to place their native tongue on their signs outside their stores. Only someone with a lifelong passion, someone whose entire life has been devoted to the motherhood issue of the rights of the French people in Quebec, could really come to grips with the idea that the government has the right to tell you what language you must speak and write.

Rene Levesque fit that description perfectly. I have yet to see a single shred of evidence that Premier Bourassa has the same genuine commitment to that kind of ideology.

No, the decision to override the court's ruling was not that of Robert Bourassa, but rather a decree from the image of Rene Levesque.

During his years in office, the French people had grown comfortable and confident that their leader would keep an eye on their lifestyle, to make sure French was first and always, the language and culture of dominance in Quebec.

They knew how to keep his separatist leanings in check, yet they wanted him as the patriarch of their French society.

In his unenviable position as leader of a party not committed to take Quebec out of Confederation, Mr. Bourassa is being watched out of the corner of every French-speaking Quebecer's eye.

Sanity would dictate that Mr. Bourassa bow to the court's decision, that it is utterly obscene to ban someone from placing a sign in his or her chosen language - any language - outside a place of business. But the watchful eyes of French-speaking Quebecers are forcing him to act in a nature that really is foreign to him, though very much in the philosophy that was held by Rene Levesque.

As premier in the early 1970s Mr. Bourassa presided over the end of Quebec's so-called "quiet revolution."

I do not recall him ever taking such a passionate stance to advance the French cause in Quebec.

It may take some time, even a generation, but slowly, the grip that Rene Levesque holds over Quebec, will ease.