

# THE AMERICAN REVIEW OF CANADIAN STUDIES

Volume 20, Number 3

Autumn 1990



## QUEBEC

Philip Resnick. *Letters to a Québécois Friend* (with a reply by Daniel Latouche) Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. ix + 125 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

In 1963 two journalists, Gwethalyn Graham and Solange Chaput (now Senator) Rolland, wrote *Dear Enemies*, a commentary on French-English relations in Canada. The ensuing decades produced scores of studies on the same theme by a myriad of social scientists, lawyers, historians, and concerned citizens. But few captured the intractability of the problem and anticipated the direction of change as well as Graham and Chaput Rolland. Will Philip Resnick's *Letters* and Daniel Latouche's reply become the *Dear Enemies* of the 1990s?

Resnick, a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia, is one of English Canada's most-informed academics on Quebec politics and a frequent participant in panels or seminars in the province. He is a social democrat and a Canadian nationalist whose previous books include *Parliament vs People* (1984) and *The Land of Cain: Class and Nationalism in English Canada* (1977). The former is a critique of Canada's tradition of *parliamentary* rather than *popular* sovereignty; the latter a tilt at the windmills of capitalism.

This work is much different. It consists of ten letters to an imaginary friend written in the aftermath of the 1988 election which was dominated by the free trade debate. He argues that those who believed that French-Canada had been badly treated in Confederation and were fighting to redress its grievances felt betrayed that Quebec turned its back on English-Canadian concern about the impact of free trade on its culture and, in so doing, provided the margin of support necessary for the Mulroney government to conclude the deal.

He raises such other issues as the treatment of the English minority in Quebec that culminated in the adoption of a bill that not only bans most outdoor English signage but uses the legislative-override provision of the constitution to make sure the bill cannot be overturned by the courts. He is critical of the increasing French-Canadian disinterest in anything about English Canada and of the Quebec government's stubbornness in refusing

to consider changes to recent constitutional proposals known as the Meech Lake Accord.

A single rejoinder to all ten letters is provided by Daniel Latouche of the Institut Nationale de Recherche Scientifique, one of the brightest and the best political minds in the province. Drawing from a bottomless pit of indignation and seemingly without stopping for a single breath, he produces an essay in the grand style of Quebec polemicists from Papineau to Trudeau. The result, perhaps symbolically, is two monologues masquerading as dialogue.

At times Latouche gets carried away with his own rhetoric. His accusations that Resnick seems to view Quebec as just one more Chinatown (96) is unfair, but, in the main, he focuses on Resnick's central thesis. Have Quebecers "succumbed" to the American pursuit of material aggrandizement and individual happiness? The answer, according to Latouche, is no, regardless of what happened in the election. He dismisses as pompous the usual theories about a rising class of French Canadian entrepreneurs who, unlike their counterparts in English Canada, are secure in their cultural identity and enthusiastic about the prospect of competition in wider markets. Most Quebecers, Latouche argues, thought free trade was a federal initiative with wide support in English Canada and wanted to be on the winning side. History offers an even simpler explanation, however. Given a choice, the Quebec electorate invariably rallies behind a federal party led by a native son.

One Resnick letter laments the Quebec government's use of the notwithstanding clause to pass Bill 178 with its restrictions on the use of English. Latouche responds that the real issue was the Supreme Court's decision to borrow from American legal thinking, thereby elevating the issue of language on commercial signs from what should have been a provincial regulatory matter into a freedom of expression issue in order to strike down previous legislation. This invited recourse to the notwithstanding clause, and the government of Quebec should be applauded for using it to uphold the principle of parliamentary supremacy, which is, or ought to be, dear to the hearts of English Canada.

He does not go on to make the more fundamental point that the 1982 Charter of Rights is having vastly different effects on the political cultures of the two groups. Outside Quebec, the charter is making people more conscious of their individual rights and encouraging them to look to the courts for protection. Within Quebec, where the rights of the collectivity have always been equally important, the charter has had much less impact. The Resnick argument about Quebec tilting toward American values thus looks very much like the kettle called the pot black. Latouche is appalled by such hypocrisy.

Resnick devotes another letter to the Meech Lake Accord, which he argues represents a new vision of federalism with a much-diminished role for the central government. Unlike Pierre Trudeau and other original "anti-Meechers," Resnick admits he came to this understanding only on election

night 1988, more than a year after the accord was signed. In keeping with the transitory nature of Resnick's constitutional position, Latouche passes lightly over Meech Lake. He agrees with the Parti Québécois (PQ) that the accord originally had little support in Quebec but growing opposition in English Canada forced most Quebecers into supporting it. If the accord failed to be ratified, as is now the case, the prospect of future generations chanting "we want Meech Lake" horrifies him.

Unlike the PQ (and in an uncomfortable alliance with Mr. Trudeau), Latouche concludes that rejection of the Meech Lake Accord will not lead to Quebec independence. "We might be emotional or even irrational, but we are not that ridiculous" (107). Would that one could see the gleam in his eye (or the tongue in his cheek) as he wrote those lines.

Whatever happened to the accord, conventional wisdom about French-English relations over the past twenty-five years needs rethinking. There will be no opening of a Berlin Wall, no unilateral declaration of independence, and no escaping the political, economic, and social realities of living so close to the United States. But there is less good will on both sides and less popular support for the Pearson-Trudeau-Clark-Turner-Mulroney vision of bilingualism and *bonne entente* that has marked Canadian politics since the early 1960s.

*Dear Enemies* dared an earlier generation of Canadians to reflect upon and overturn some fundamental assumptions about their country. These letters may stimulate them to question the wisdom of policies that have led to an increasingly incoherent constitutional structure and language policies that antagonize both English and French Canadians. If that proves to be the direction of the 1990s, these letters will be an invaluable guide to what is happening and why.

Gary Levy  
Department of Political Science  
University of Western Ontario