

C O M M E N T

# Beyond the solitudes: how to bridge the gap

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**T**he most important political event of the year in the anglophone community took place last week. I am not talking about the referendum, but the launching of a film produced by Josh Freed and Abbey Nidik, "Between Solitudes/Entre Solitudes."

The thrust of the film is that anglophone Montrealers have an intense love for their city and for Quebec — but share an angst about its future.

While no surprise to those who read *The Gazette*, this is a somewhat revolutionary notion for many francophone Quebecers, who harbor a deep suspicion of the anglophone community as a sort of linguistic "fifth column" within the province.

Despite the film's title, contacts have never really been as distant as the "Two Solitudes" tag suggests: there were anglophone Patriotes in 1837, and many mayors of Montreal and Quebec City came from the anglophone community prior to the turn of the century.

As well, social relations, community involvement and inter-marriage have always been commonplace.

While that changed somewhat in this century, today the anglophone community is the most bilingual in the country, a point that is underscored in the film by the sight of young, bilingual anglophone Montrealers who say they

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cannot get employment because their last name is not "de souche Québécoise."

A report in *Le Devoir* says this scene and others have a "stunning" effect on francophones.

In the next two years, the community must prepare itself for the renewal of the notwithstanding clause and Bill 178 — which are bound to be issues in the next election campaign.

Premier Robert Bourassa is caught on the horns of a dilemma: he can promise to maintain the application of Bills 101 or 178, or be accused of having "sold out" to the dreaded anglophone community.

The result of either course of action could be the further isolation of, or the hemorrhaging of, the anglophone community.

The question remains: how do we get the attention of the francophone community and its leaders? The first lesson of the referendum applies here. Elite accommodation does not work. No matter how much lobbying is undertaken by the leaders of our community, it will be like whispers in the wind as long as negative perceptions of us remain in

French-speaking Quebec.

One option would be to emulate Richard Holden and David Payne by becoming part of the separatist mainstream. Another would be to join the Equality Party en masse. Yet another would be to take to the streets in violent protest.

None of these are viable options — as the community has shown itself to be strongly attached to Canada, not interested in further marginalization and having neither the ability nor inclination towards violence.

There is a fourth option, however, and that is why the Freed/Nidik film is so important. Between now and the next election, a massive program could be undertaken by anglophones to explain our community to French-speaking Quebec.

Whether it be through speeches to chambers of commerce in Rimouski or Chicoutimi, plays, films, university courses, or the presence of an anglo columnist in *La Presse*, these actions could assist in destroying the stereotypes that have crippled public debate in Quebec for the past 20 years.

In 1990 in Montreal West, we protested against Bill 178 by pointing out the absurdities of the sign law (how do you translate "haggis?") and calling into question, through the francophone media, the issue of whether we were "accepted."

In our own small way, we won our

fight because of the embarrassment felt by francophones about the application of the law.

There have been noteworthy efforts made in the past — sporadic at best: the studies of Alliance Quebec; the Chambers report on education, and others. They have not penetrated the psyche of the people that count the most — average francophone Quebecers.

It is all very well to say that we want to build bridges, but not when those bridges pass over the vast majority of the population, who affect the political agenda.

From the upheaval of the 1970s through to last Monday, most of the English-speaking Quebecers who remain here have made some sort of firm decision that this is our home and this is where we want to stay.

Most of us have had the opportunity to live and work elsewhere at better pay and fewer hassles. But we choose to live here.

When will that message get through? We must break down the myth of the Two Solitudes by explaining to our fellow citizens the contribution we have always made to Quebec and Canada.

The time to start that process is now; the alternative is to bury our community's future and walk away.

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