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Who are the victims of Quebec bashing?

By Dan Laxer on November 4, 2010

Gilles Rhéaume and his Ligue Québécoise contre la francophobie canadienne are heading to the United Nations to ask the Human Rights Committee to denounce "Quebec bashing" as a form of racism, discrimination, and xenophobia.

What the Quebecois perceive as Quebec bashing seems to have swelled in the wake of the 1995 referendum. The expression seems to be cognate with "Gay bashing," a reprehensible form of discrimination-based violence, not unlike lynchings in the American south decades ago. The term 'homophobia' implies a manifest hatred of gays, often expressed through violence, stemming from a deep-rooted fear. A similar deep-rooted fear of French-Canadians does not exist, nor does a similar form of violence targeting the Quebecois. Mr. Rhéaume's use of terms like "francophobie" and "Quebecophobia" offends me.

I am also offended by the implied assertion that those who live according to the laws of Quebec, those who abide by that set of arbitrarily appointed regulations that deprive Anglophones and Allophones of their rights, may not publicly and vocally take issue with those laws, rules, and regulations without being branded racist, discriminatory, or xenophobic. I used to cringe when former Premier Lucien Bouchard would trot out the term "humiliation," as if crying that feelings had been hurt was enough to stifle legitimate critique.

There is nothing wrong with Quebec bashing if it means taking issue with either the government of Quebec, or aspects of the ingrained culture of the Quebecois majority that could foster discrimination of Quebec residents from other cultural groups. The Bouchard-Taylor commission was criticized, and praised, for exposing the ugly underbelly of Quebec society. At least we know, some said at the time, where we stand.

There is nothing wrong with Quebec bashing if it means casting a critical eye, and a critical voice, upon those policies one finds unacceptable and incompatible with a democratic society. Bill 103, the successor to Bill 104, was pushed past the democratic throng who had long ago stopped trusting their government to uphold and respect not just the constitution and the letter of the law, but the spirit of democracy.

Where does this great cry of Quebec bashing come from? Call it a backlash. Was there at time when Francophones were treated as second class citizens in their own homes? Certainly. Gabrielle Roy's The Tin Flute chronicles the dichotomy of inequality between the English on the hill and the French down below. Did the fist-waving heroes of the October Crisis inspire the Quebecois to rise up and become the Maîtres chez eux they always knew they could be? Perhaps. The Crisis blurred lines between hero and villain. And those who cheered on the heroes of the would-be revolution are today pointing fingers at such Old World English institutions as, well, Macleans magazine.

The magazine, and writer Martin Patriquin, labelled Quebec as "the most corrupt province." Is pointing that out tantamount to Quebec bashing? Mr. Patriquin did not blame the perceived corruption on anything inherent in Quebec culture, or on some atavistic carryover from the French character. There was no mention of the old standby stereotype of "Pepsi-May West," or its bastardization "Pepper." No one from the Rest of Canada has ever called for Quebec to be bulldozed into the sea. And I haven't heard of any WASPs spray-painting anti-French slogans all over town.

But I used to see "Anglo go home" tagged here and there, and it confused me; where did that mean I was I supposed to go? I have never heard of Francophone tombstones being toppled or defaced. But I have seen Anglophone Jewish tombstones desecrated in the very cemetery where my grandparents, father-in-law, and other family members are buried. I don't know who is responsible, and I cannot make any assumptions as to who I suspect, regardless of the history of strife between the Jewish and French communities in Montreal.

Mr. Rhéaume provides a handful of examples of noted Quebec bashers, like novelist Mordecai Richler, political gadfly Howard Galganov, journalist Diane Francis, Don Cherry, and, of course, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

The Galganov era of Quebec politics came with its own set of problems, and really amounted to no more than a footnote in Quebec history. Mr. Galganov is gone now, and so, it seems to me, are the kind of sentiments he harboured deep in his belly. Don Cherry is a clown. Given his infamous sport jackets and flippant on-screen performances, I don't think he'd object to that characterization.

Mordecai Richler, though, still haunts the Quebecois, or at least those few who still feel the sting of what they considered to be misplaced invective. Richler made a career of holding up a mirror to



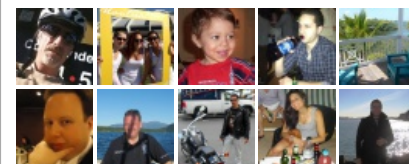
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society. In 1992, he wrote Oh Canada, Oh Quebec: Requiem for a Divided Country. In that book, and in two journalistic pieces that preceded it, Richler chronicled the history of discrimination against anyone and anything not French in Quebec. Needless to say, Richler was vilified in the Francophone community, and still today, nearly a decade after his death, is considered an enemy of the people.

"I'm trying to tell the truth," Richler said at the time. "I don't think that it's something that has to be in season, like hockey or hay fever. I think you should be able to tell the truth any time. And if it makes people uncomfortable, I can't help it."

Indeed, if his claims can be substantiated by history, and I think that they can, then can they really be considered Quebec bashing?

I was disappointed in Maclean's for pulling its punches and apologizing for the magazine cover, which depicted Bonhomme Carnaval carrying a cash-stuffed briefcase. I thought it was funny, as good an attempt at pointed criticism as an editorial cartoon can be. It is hardly Quebec bashing, because, again, corruption exists in Quebec, and Bonhomme is as good a representative of Quebec as anyone.

The direction and target of any kind of bashing in this province would seem to be out of proportion. And the community who seems to suffer the least has some nerve tapping the UN for help. The term "nation" has become complicated over time. If separatist Francophones want to consider themselves a nation, that's their business, whether La Federale supports them or not. But to spuriously argue that they have become the targets of discrimination is dishonest and arrogant, and makes a mockery of the real discrimination that identifiable groups genuinely face every day, right here in Quebec.

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