

IS THE FRENCH-CANADIAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS IMMIGRATION CHANGING?

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AS is well known, during the past century, the French-Canadians have been the most emphatic of all the sectional and economic groups in Canada in their unyielding hostility towards immigration, from whatever region or source into Canada. This attitude has very obvious historical causes. Immigration from France into Canada has never been large or important at any period since 1763. The important successive waves of migration from Europe to this country such as those of the decades of the nineteen hundreds and the nineteen twenties brought no gains of population to the French-speaking group within the Canadian ethnic framework. The amazing growth of the French-speaking group in Canada during the past two centuries, has been almost solely the result of their natural increase and has had no help from outside Canada. Indeed the only Latin nation of Europe which has sent large numbers of its sons to Canada was Italy in the earlier period of the present century, before both nations put up barriers against this movement of population. French-Canadians, as a national minority group, have in the past tended to regard immigration as a totally Anglo-Saxon and non-French phenomenon designed to increase the weight and importance of the English-speaking group in the nation at the expense of themselves. This sentiment has been reinforced by the fact that the vast majority of the settlers in Canada from the continental European countries, upon their arrival here, have settled in Ontario and the Prairie Provinces and not in Quebec and have adopted English rather than French as their new native tongue. Their children have become absorbed into the English Canadian cultural pattern. Indeed, some of the more fanatical of the French-Canadian nationalists in the past have looked upon the various immigration schemes which have been sponsored and aided by the Canadian Government as part of a deliberate and deep laid plot on the part of English-speaking Canada to swamp French-Canadian influence throughout the country as a whole. However regrettable this point of view may be, it is quite comprehensible as the reaction of a minority which is continually on the defensive against what it regards as attacks on its own language and institutions.

When immigration into Canada dropped to a tiny trickle in the depression period of the nineteen thirties, this question

came to be of merely academic interest, but now, with the resumption of a large scale movement of population from the British Isles and Europe to Canada in 1946, following the close of the Second World War in which France and the Latin countries of Europe have had little share, the population policy of the Canadian Government has again come into the spotlight. Some circles in Quebec are again filled with apprehension at the present trends of settlement in Canada.

But in making a survey of the organs of opinion in French Canada, it is interesting to note that a considerable change in viewpoint has crept into the discussion of this matter recently. This change is visible even in the more narrow nationalist circles where the very idea of immigration was abhorrent ten years ago. For one thing, the French-Canadians are beginning to realize the importance and the significance of the non Anglo-Saxon and the non French elements within the population of Canada as a whole. Formerly, they had the habit of lumping together collectively all the non-French residents of the Maritimes, Ontario, the Prairie provinces and the other regions of Canada outside of the province of Quebec as "Anglais", but they are now realizing that this is by no means exclusively the case. They are gradually becoming aware that there is a large group of Canadians, especially in such provinces as Saskatchewan and Alberta, whose former native lands are located in the regions of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Germany, the Soviet Union, Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Roumania and Bulgaria and that although these persons have adopted the English language and English-Canadian ways and outlook, yet that they have certain points of resemblance with the inhabitants of the province of Quebec. When these groups of people become fully assimilated to the North American environment, they adopt attitudes which in many ways are much more exclusively Canadian, than those of many Canadians of purely Anglo-Saxon origin. Like the French-Canadians, they look upon themselves as Canadians first and as citizens of the British Commonwealth second. They cannot be expected to have the deep and hereditary attachment to all things British which is so typical of the dwellers in Ontario and the Maritimes. Then there is the fact that these groups of new Canadians, although they give a thorough and enthusiastic allegiance to the land of their adoption, yet they are striving to keep certain elements of their cultural heritage from the Old World—their native folk arts, their music and literature—alive on Canadian soil. And here

they have common objectives with the French-Canadians in putting up some sort of resistance against a complete domination by North American models in these fields. The French-Canadians are coming to see that in the past, they have not made nearly sufficient efforts to exploit and utilize these cultural ties and links. Discussion of this question is becoming widespread in the French-Canadian press.

The same attitude applies to the settlers newly arrived from various parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Here the religious tie with French Canada is also comparatively strong, since well over sixty per cent of these people are of the Roman Catholic faith.

The well-known and widely-read nationalist Daily in Montreal—"Le Devoir"—gave expression to these sentiments in recent editorial of October 20th, 1949. It said on this subject:—"In the past, we have failed to distinguish between the immigration policy of the Canadian Government and the people that it has brought us. To the same degree that it is necessary that we should combat mass immigration and that immigration should be supervised when it is more or less effective, selective, so, to the same degree, we should display understanding towards immigrants and help them to integrate themselves in Canadian life. We have in the past, been far too prone to take the idea for granted that these new Canadians would inevitably become Anglicized, while, on the contrary, it is necessary to encourage them to keep their own culture and to acquaint and familiarize themselves with the French-Canadian background and environment under the best possible light. It has taken us a very long time to become aware that the community of faith creates a very strong bond between the majority of these new Canadians and ourselves and that they have been familiar with and appreciated French culture. We have been too slow in realizing that the choices which are presented to the immigrant who enters Canada can often be exercised in favour of French culture if we wish to take the trouble to make efforts in that direction."

One reason for this gradual shift in attitude on this matter in French Canada has been the new and different character of the migration which has taken place from Europe since 1945. In earlier periods, such as the era preceding the First World War, the great majority of the new Canadians were people predominantly of the farming and working classes. In many cases, they were not favoured with a great deal of formal education. They wanted to effect a clean break with their former European

background and make themselves good Canadians as soon as possible. But recently, a large proportion of the new immigration, especially among the category of the Displaced Persons, comes from a very different stratum of the national population. Many of them and especially those which hail from nations of Eastern Europe which are now under Soviet domination, such as Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czecho Slovakia and the Baltic States, are people with a good cultural background—former doctors, lawyers, professional men and women, journalists, teachers and intellectuals of various types. They have grown up in countries where the cultural and intellectual bonds with France have always been close and intimate and where the prestige of French literature, art, music, thought and science, has always been very high. In many cases, they can speak French fluently and have a better command of that language than of English. The intellectual elite in French Canada, now realize the possibility, by the use of the right approach, of winning over these highly desirable additions to Canada's population, to an understanding and appreciation of French-Canadian culture and Quebec viewpoints. They fully realize that in the existing situation in Canada, it would be far too much to expect to French-Canadianize them fully but at least they can be made to see that the English Canadian way of life is not the only one in this country.

The first institution in the province of Quebec to actively interest itself in this type of work was the Catholic School Commission of the City of Montreal—the metropolis of Canada which is probably the most mixed and cosmopolitan in the racial character of its population and where great numbers of these newcomers have settled in recent years. The School Commission has recently set up a service for the teaching of both French and English to the new European immigrants in order to help them in a rapid assimilation to their new environment. Here, ex-nationals of almost every country in Central and Eastern Europe—Poles, Hungarians, Roumanians, Bulgarians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and Germans receive instruction. The Catholic Authorities in Montreal have also made another move in this work by establishing a Centre of Aid for Immigrants. The primary aim of this institution is, of course, spiritual. Its purpose is to keep the Catholic settlers firmly within the bounds of the Faith. But it also has a cultural purpose in giving these people an acquaintance with various aspects of Quebec culture and Institutions. Its breadth of outlook is shown by the fact that although it is primarily meant for New Canadians of the Catholic Faith, yet members of other denominations, such as

Lutherans and members of the Greek Orthodox Church are free to use its services.

The University of Montreal, which is a leader among French Canadian educational institutions and which has made great strides in the expansion of the scope of its general activities recently, is also interesting itself actively in the cultural situation of these people. It has inaugurated a Department of Slavonic Studies, which is probably the best equipped organization of this type in Canada, and which gives courses in the English and French languages and literature for students who are members of the Slavonic races.

Considering this question from a broader aspect, it may be said that antagonism in Quebec towards any policy of unrestricted mass immigration into Canada remains as intense and deeply rooted as ever. But a policy of Selective Immigration such as is being practiced by the Canadian Government at the present time, which will allow into this country a due proportion of settlers from the Continent of Europe as against those from the British Isles, is no longer looked upon with complete disfavour. This new viewpoint has been aided by the recent pronouncements of the Vatican on the work of the International Refugee Organization and upon the necessity of the giving by Catholics of aid and succour to the victims of political and religious persecution in all regions of the world. If, in the near future, the Canadian Government should decide to allow unrestricted migration from Italy—a badly overcrowded and overpopulated nation—to Canada, there would be no strong attitude of opposition on the part of Quebec.

These new attempts to form cultural ties—both with the new Canadians in the Western provinces and with the recent arrivals from the Continent of Europe, show that the walls of isolation which have surrounded French Canada for so many decades and which have kept this region of Canada so hermetically sealed from contact with the currents and movements of the modern world, are slowly beginning to crumble. If this movement is conducted in the right manner, it should form a powerful influence towards the greater understanding between the different racial and cultural groups which make up modern Canada.