

# The Jewish Community of Quebec Province: Bridging The Past And The Present\*

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*. . . Is there a level of balance that can be achieved? True integration may not imply assimilation, but . . . perhaps we must begin, as Quebec Jews, to feel more comfortable firstly with the notion of "participatory non-integration."*

## The Jews of Quebec in the Context of "Defensive Withdrawal"

It has been more than two and one-half years since the election of the independentist Parti Quebecois government in Quebec. No other event in the recent history of the Jewish community of Quebec has been able to generate such ongoing anxieties and tensions within this community. The fact that the Jewish community was so brutally shocked by the election of a provincial government advocating the negotiation of a sovereign Quebec in economic association with Canada ("Sovereignty-Association") underlines the Jewish community's distance from the socio-political and socio-cultural realities of contemporary Quebec.

This paper will raise a number of dilemmas which confront the Jewish community of Quebec. The nature of the response to these dilemmas by the leadership and membership of the Quebec Jewish community is vitally important as it will help determine our levels of comfort and integration within Quebec society. Lack of response to these dilemmas has resulted in the Jewish community of Quebec feeling a sense of leaderlessness, hopelessness, and pessimism about its future in Quebec.

The most recent Canadian census figures (1971) indicate 109,000 Jews within Quebec, almost all of them within the Montreal Metropolitan area. The population of the Province of Quebec numbers approximately 6 million, roughly 80 percent of which are French-speaking Quebecois. The history of French Canada over the last two hundred years, following the British "conquest" in 1759, the unsuccessful 1837-38 rebellion

against the British, and finally the British North-America Act of 1867, resulted in what the current Quebec Minister of Cultural Affairs has termed "defensive withdrawal":

*. . . defensive withdrawal within ourselves, a nation reduced to a minority on this continent which we had discovered and developed. The direct consequence was a constant distancing between ourselves, henceforth called the "French Canadians" and the various minority groups continually growing in our country, supported by immigration policies conceived by others than ourselves. It is the period of absolute distrust (1840-1960) spanning the century which, finally, will be the most bitter of our national history.<sup>1</sup>*

It is within this context of French Canada's "defensive withdrawal" that the Jewish community settled in Quebec. While Jews have been living in the Province of Quebec for over two hundred years, it is only within the last 75 years that the population has grown to significance. Most of Montreal's Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe, although in the last fifties and early sixties, an influx of French-speaking North-African Jewish immigrants has added significantly to the Jewish community. In 1900, the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Vaugeois, "The Jews and Quebec Society: A Common Cultural Future," *Quebec at a Glance*, Vol. 9/10/11, 1978, p. 4.

population was 7,000. It grew to 46,000 in 1921; 64,000 in 1941; 102,000 in 1961; and 109,000 in 1971.

While Jews gravitated to Quebec at the time of French Canada's "defensive withdrawal", this lack of acceptance of minorities encouraged the Jewish community to identify with the English-speaking population of Quebec. This latter population continually saw itself as part of the English Canadian majority rather than an English-speaking minority within a French majority. Furthermore, the educational system of Quebec, which even today continues to be confessionally based (Catholic and Protestant) provided for, until rather recently, the education of non-Catholics in the Protestant confessional stream, which was and is largely English language-based. Moreover, at the time of this "defensive withdrawal" by French Canadians, the Jews realized that the use of English was indispensable for their success in business and the professions in Canada and North America.

#### **The "Quiet Revolution: Profitable Federalism"**

The notion of "defensive withdrawal" came to an abrupt end in the early 1960's with the advent of what is known in Quebec as *la revolution tranquille* (the Quiet Revolution). From this period, irreversible progress has been made in the economic, social, cultural, and political evolution of Quebec. The people of Quebec, via successive governments, came to recognize real political and economic power. The cultural and political distinctiveness of the French Canadian nation was enshrined through legal protection whereby Quebec continually negotiated with the Federal government for authority and control over cultural, educational, and fiscal domains. At a symbolic level, Quebecers saw their institutions beginning to reflect an ever-increasing sense of progressive social and political "nationhood." The "Legislative Assembly" became the "National Assembly;" Quebec began to develop a sense of international presence with *delegations* in foreign capitals, and major American centers.

Beyond the political and symbolic changes, however, the real "revolution" was in the amazing *ratrapage* (catching up) planned and executed by French Canadians themselves. Young Quebecers were able to turn their eyes and souls outwards, desire the benefits and success of twentieth-century North America, and achieve them. Whereas only twenty years earlier, the Quebec Government could not even claim the existence of a Ministry of Education, the range of collegial and university institutions existing throughout Quebec today is indeed impressive, and competes at a first rate level with the rest of North America. The abandonment of the traditional French Canadian professions which nurtured the "defensive withdrawal," the clergy, law, and medicine, and the substitution or extension of these through scientific and business academic pursuits and success was stimulated by a strongly developing economy, and an immensely growing, if not overdeveloped, government bureaucracy. The social democratic legislation of recent governments has encouraged the development of the "public sector," providing for tremendous expansion of employment opportunities, while at the same time visibly demonstrating to the people of Quebec productive consequences of the Government's action in the areas of health care, social services, education, natural resource development, transportation development, and so forth.

Concomitant with the economic, social, and political evolution of Quebec was the obvious question of French Canadian nationalism. In the political context, French Canadian nationalism has traditionally expressed itself via two options: nationalist aspirations of French Canadians living on the territory of Quebec can best be responded to either (a) within the Canadian context or (b) within an independent Quebec context. It must be pointed out that Quebec nationalism is not a new phenomenon. Successive Quebec governments, even those advocating a "federalist" orientation, still made it clear that "profitable federalism" was the issue; slogans such as *maitres chez nous* (masters in our own house) characterized the

federalist orientation of provincial politics in Quebec. The current Parti Quebecois government of Quebec was born approximately ten years ago. During a short period of time the Parti developed strong grass-roots acceptance by French Canadians in Quebec. Combinations of strong grass-root support, high quality political campaigning, attractive political candidates, a promise of "good government," and generalized dissatisfaction with the previous Liberal Government resulted in the election of the Parti Quebecois on November 15, 1976.

#### **Jewish Insularity—A Major Dilemma**

Whether this government wins or loses in the upcoming referendum to seek a mandate to negotiate sovereignty-association with the rest of Canada, or whether it is defeated at the next provincial election, many of the dilemmas which need to be confronted by the Jewish community will continue to exist. The linguistic changes in Quebec, termed "francization," have been and are very obvious indicators of how French Quebecers wish to view and control their society. This paper is neither intended to defend nor attack the current Quebec government or its legislative platforms. The intent is to underscore the point that the Jewish community of Montreal needs to come to grips with demanding realities. The most obvious of these realities is that the traditional insularity and isolation of the Jewish community of the past are under assault. While other communities in Quebec may have been similarly insulated and isolated, it is not my intention to deal with the full range of minorities of Quebec, but to focus only on the Jewish community. The Jewish community has been characterized by its successful adaptation to life in Quebec in the past, in spite of its early basically "unwelcoming" environment. The "defensive withdrawal" of French Canadians meant that there was minimal outreach from French Canadians and interplay with them, except at a basically mercantile level. As has already been noted, Jews were thrust into the English-speaking educational stream.

What needs to be underlined here is that the Jewish community of today has forgotten its recent history in Quebec. While the Jews of Montreal see themselves as largely English-speaking, they have forgotten the price they had to pay to become identified with the English or Anglophone community. The Jews of Montreal today have forgotten that they had to fight their way into English Montreal. It is not so long ago, only three decades, when there were Jewish quotas in the major English language universities of Montreal. It is only within the last decade that Jews of Montreal have been allowed to vote and present themselves as candidates in school board elections, even though their school tax payments formed a significant portion of the total revenues of the Montreal English-speaking school board. In spite of these quotas and barriers, the Jewish community learned how to survive and thrive.

The Jewish community of Montreal is a strongly immigrant community. Even today, more than half of the members of the Jewish community were born outside of North America, and only one-sixth have a parent born in North America. Montreal's Jewish community has one of the highest proportions of foreign-born of any North American city. Additionally, Montreal has an exceedingly high proportion of Nazi holocaust survivors amongst its population. The early Jewish immigrants to Quebec were largely unfamiliar with both French and English, they were poor, unskilled, poorly educated refugees from oppression. Even with the poverty, the ignorance and the lack of language skills, and in spite of a non-welcoming, if not overtly hostile French and English-speaking "host communities," the Jews "made it." Perhaps *because* of the somewhat impenetrable barriers erected by both the French and English communities, the Jews developed the Montreal Jewish community into one of the most vibrant in North America. They counted on themselves, and they did it for themselves. A full range of elementary and secondary Jewish day schools, ranging from Yiddish-Zionist to Hassidic, afternoon schools, dozens of syna-

gogues and religious institutions, highly developed social service and immigrant reception agencies, community-initiated and supported health services, chronic care facilities, recreation and leisure-time services, were all developed with the efforts of these immigrant Jews bent on making the Montreal Jewish community a strong Jewish center. And they did it.

#### **Adaptation to the Realities of Quebec**

Now, these same Jews, perhaps one generation removed, are being asked to confront another challenge, adaptation to the socio-cultural and socio-political changes within Quebec. And whereas, in the past, this community was able to "make it" so well in spite of the tremendous odds against it, the odds of prejudice and discrimination, poverty and limited education, this very same community is now challenged with the need to adapt to Quebec. This community is now exceedingly well-resourced in comparison with the earlier generation. Today's Jews in Montreal are generally well-educated, successful in business and professions, relatively affluent and culturally sophisticated and even the most bilingual of all Quebec's minority groups. Yet, with all these successes behind them, Montreal Jews worry about whether they can "make it" in the new Quebec. Indeed, many of Montreal Jews ask, in view of the assault on their traditional insularity, and in view of the push to greater participation in French Quebec society, do they really want to "make it" in Quebec?

It is my view that, until proven to the contrary, the Jews of Quebec can continue to have a vibrant and exciting community, if they wish it. The Jewish community will need to adapt to the socio-cultural changes in Quebec, and will need help from community institutions with this process. Most important, it will need, and is strongly lacking, communal leadership which is able to express faith in itself, in the strength of the Jewish community of Quebec, and confidence in the good-will of the larger French majority of Quebec. The Jewish community may have become more affluent,

more professionalized, and more sophisticated, but it is still exceedingly isolated.

In other Canadian provinces, or in the United States, Jews have affiliated themselves and participated actively, even at key leadership levels, with a full range of political options; this has not been the case in Quebec. Jews have been largely absent from the Quebec political scene, and have generally tended to rally behind only one political party (the Quebec Liberal Party). Jews in Quebec are also characterized by a very high degree of economic segregation. The majority of Montreal Jews work for Jews or Jewish-owned enterprises; a minority use French to any significant extent at work.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas the Jews of Quebec see themselves as successful English-speaking Canadians, they have developed to this point largely in isolation from, and isolated by, French Canadians. But these days of isolation are over. Whereas the Jews of Montreal "just want to be left alone," there is now a social force surrounding them which urges them strongly and clearly to "participate". It is up to the Jewish community to define both internally and in concert with the larger society what this "participation" means. The fact that the Jewish community has been ignoring the question of "participation" means that the Jewish community has been unable to look beyond its former insularity.

What is required of the Jewish community is that it develop the same kind of contact and association with the French-speaking community as it fought for and achieved with the English community. We are not talking here of assimilation, or even of significant integration. Most Jews in Montreal will tell you that they are basically not "integrated" into the Montreal English-speaking non-Jewish community. They co-exist with it. What is required is for the Jewish community to recognize that it needs to work towards this same degree of "non-integration" with the Francophone community as it has with the Anglophone community. Perhaps stating the issue in terms

<sup>2</sup> Jewish Community Research Institute, *A Survey of the Jewish Community of Montreal*, 1979.

of negatives, in terms of "non-integration," might make the notion a bit more acceptable to the Jews of Montreal. But, this is really a play on words. The reality is that there is no significant political force or social force in Quebec or within Canada which will advocate on behalf of or protect the interests of entrenched English language minority groups in Quebec which do not wish to accommodate to the new cultural realities of Quebec. This message has been delivered clearly by provincial and federal leaders in Quebec and Canada of all significant political parties. The reality is that the English-speaking population of Quebec has been told not only by the independentist Premier of Quebec, but by the federalist leader of the Provincial opposition party, as well as by the Prime Minister of Canada, that "Quebec is to become as French as Ontario is English." Once that notion can be accepted by significant forces within the Jewish community of Montreal, we can get on with the job. The job is to continue to develop ourselves, our community, our families, in productive and satisfying fashions, in a Quebec which is becoming overwhelmingly "French".

#### **Role of Jewish Community Leadership**

A primary dilemma, therefore, is the role of the Jewish community leadership. Today, the Jewish community leadership of Montreal is seen by many as a mirror image reflection of the community "followership". The leadership of the major Jewish community institutions of Montreal have been unable to emerge as risk-taking, direction-providing, and most important, unable to demonstrate a sense of confidence in themselves and the future of the community. Too many members of the leadership are characterized by community members as "sitting on packed suitcases". What about large numbers of Jews who either do not wish or are unable to leave? What about those members of the Jewish community that are looking for indication of confidence in the community's ability to adapt to the changes in Quebec, and are willing to make those adaptations? These people are not seen

as represented by the community's leadership.

There is nothing "anti-Jewish" happening in Quebec of a significant or organized nature. There is a government-sponsored initiative aimed at reducing access to and the visibility of the English language in Quebec. As unacceptable as this may be for a variety of moral, civil libertarian, or pragmatic reasons, it needs to be noted that, as far as the Jewish community is concerned, it is its "Englishness" and not its "Jewishness" which is the point of contention. Community leadership, to date, has taken little if no action not only to encourage, but assure the linguistic adaptation of the Jewish community's institutions. Insufficient help has been provided by the leadership of the community to its members which indicates an acceptance of the French reality of Quebec and indication to the members of the Jewish community that the Jewish community can not only live with this, but live as a part of it.

There is a high level of resentment within the Jewish community about language legislation which erodes the freedom of choice of Quebec residents in terms of access to, use of, or visibility of English language services. In my opinion, it is not the agenda of the Jewish community, on an organized communal basis, to fight for a "bilingual" Quebec. *What is required is for the Jewish community to truly accept the French language realities of Quebec, and for the structures of the Jewish community to actively ensure the total bilingualism of members of the Jewish community so that they can be as equally competent in French as they are in English today.* This is not only a symbolic gesture, but a gesture which is the only one that can be made in order to assure the participation of the Jewish community in a changed Quebec. This kind of statement is often seen by many members of the Jewish community as implying the "unlearning" of English. To the contrary, the goal is to have the Jewish community characterized as being truly bilingual, with its services reflecting both the linguistic realities of Quebec, and irrefutable realities of the need for English in the North American and international general and Jewish contexts.

### Encouraging Jewish Immigration to Quebec and Other Programs for Adaptation

A further dilemma is the inability of the Jewish community leadership to consider strategic programs for action and to consider institutions assuring the community's thriving beyond that of a declining repository of the "old and immobile". This dilemma is of particular importance to our Jewish brethren outside of Quebec. The Jewish community of Montreal needs to engage actively in a program of immigrant recruitment in order to continue not only to maintain but to renew the Jewish community. There is currently no strong advocacy coming from Jewish community sources in the direction of encouraging immigration to the Jewish community of Montreal. To the contrary, this is largely an ignored area. Every effort should be undertaken together with international Jewish resettlement organizations, as well as with the Canadian and Quebec governments, to promote the recruitment and resettlement of Jewish immigrants to Quebec. Simply, there are Jewish people who have, are, and will be leaving their countries of residence or origin for either "push or pull" reasons, and the institutional structures of the Jewish community of Montreal are not presenting our community as ready, willing, and excited about welcoming immigrant Jews. There are even members of the Jewish community leadership who feel that it would be irresponsible at this time to encourage Jewish immigration to Quebec in the face of existing uncertainty.

#### Anti-Semitism: A Non-Issue

As someone who has worked for years with both the Jewish community and with representatives of the Quebec government, and as someone who has a history of social relationships in both the Jewish and French Canadian community, I state clearly that the question of institutional, state-sponsored, or socially acceptable anti-Semitism or anti-Jewish manifestations is simply a "non-issue" in Quebec. Whereas the disease of anti-Semitism is probably as likely to manifest itself in Quebec

as anywhere else in the western world, there is not a shred of evidence to indicate that Quebec is more of a problem area than elsewhere. There are those who feel that references to French Canadian anti-Semitism where there is not any, or the likening of French Canadian nationalism with that of Nazi Germany, can precipitate an anti-Jewish backlash. Offensive and ill-founded accusations of anti-Semitism or Nazi-like comparisons in Anglo-Jewish North American publications are a source of great irritation to even "neutral French Canadians". A Jewish professor teaching at l'Universite de Montreal has written: "It is probable that the vociferous and often offensive opposition to the French Canadian nationalism expressed in North America's Jewish press may create a backlash against the real Jews living in Quebec. While so far the probability of such a backlash is not high, those writing on the subject should be aware that it, nevertheless, exists. What service do they do their fellow Jews in Quebec when they compare their situation with Nazi Germany?"<sup>3</sup>

While anti-Semitism may not be an issue within Quebec, the lack of Jewish presence in many sectors of Quebec society, particularly French university campuses, and within labour movements, has given rise to some pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist manifestations. Informed students of this area confess that the problem is related to the larger presence of Arab students on university campuses, in comparison with the limited presence of Jewish or Israeli students, to provide an alternative point of view. Whereas anti-Zionist manifestations would perhaps be more immediately condemned or even noticed by non-Jews in other parts of North America, these are often ignored by French Canadians, but can become a source of real concern to members of the Quebec Jewish community. Quebecers tend generally to be poorly informed about not only the Jewish community,

<sup>3</sup> Yakov M. Rabkin, "Quebec '78 Is Not Berlin '33," *Sh'ma, A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, Vol. 9/161, November 1978, p. 8.

but also about Israel, and tend to be unaware of depth of "Jewish-Zionist inter-relationship". There is the need for a well-planned media initiative on behalf of Jewish and Zionist sources in Quebec to reach out to Quebecers and explain the realities of Jewish life in Quebec, in Israel, and elsewhere.

### **The Jews and the Parti Quebecois**

Another important dilemma is the lack of "responsiveness" of the current government to the Quebec Jewish community. In essence, the Parti Quebecois government does not feel that it is " beholden " to the Jewish community. This is a potentially difficult area in that the current Quebec government is sometimes characterized by minorities as the government of those who voted for it, and has done little to date to allay the fears and anxieties of minorities in Quebec who may feel threatened and insecure, not knowing what is their place in Quebec. However, this is only partially correct. The previous government, the Liberal Government, which received substantial, if not overwhelming, support of the Jewish community, also enacted language legislation aimed at reducing freedom of access to English language in Quebec. Whereas this legislation was seen as unacceptable to large segments of the Jewish community, Jews, nevertheless, continued to demonstrate their political allegiance to this Party. There is the feeling that the current government, because it knows members of the Jewish community have not voted for it, and are unlikely to do so in the future, need not be particularly considerate of the sensitivities of the Jewish community. This has manifested itself in pressures on government-subsidized Jewish day schools for more hours of French-language instruction and reductions in government subsidies to those schools unwilling to accept what has been characterized as unacceptable levels of French-language studies. Similarly, this lack of sensitivity may have manifested itself in the Government's insufficient responsiveness to Jewish community invitations for senior level government representation at events such as the 30th Anniversary festivities for Israel, or

the recent visit of the Prime Minister of Israel to Montreal. Jurisdictional disputes between Quebec and Ottawa or protocol questions seemed to have taken precedence over the sensitivities of members of the Jewish community, who felt offended by the lack of government presence at these significant Jewish events. Either representatives of the government were unaware of the impact that such unresponsiveness would have on the Jewish community, or were unconcerned about the impact of this unresponsiveness.

### **Employment Opportunities for Jews**

The following dilemma is often raised by concerned members of the Jewish community of Montreal: even if we learn French perfectly, will we be able to compete for the same jobs and at the same levels with those whose names are Belanger and Vaillancourt, even though our names may be Cohen or Goldberg? The question is an important one and an impossible one to answer. It requires confidence in French Quebecers, and self-confidence in the Jewish community. It also needs to be pointed out that while our names are Cohen and Goldberg, and even though we mastered the English language, this did not assure acceptance by the English-speaking community of high-level corporate positions in the past. This is a question that can be answered only through experience, experience with Jews making themselves present and visible in French Quebec, and experience with French Canadians accepting Jews within French Quebec.

### **Jews Are Quebec's Representatives Too**

This leads to another significant issue. The Quebec Government has opened government information offices in various major cities throughout the United States. Beyond the obvious objectives of encouraging economic development and tourism, these Quebec government offices also have the added objective of presenting the socio-political realities and intended changes in Quebec, in a fashion which will make them acceptable to "the American people". While these "ambas-

sadors of goodwill" employed by the Quebec Government may or may not have an effect on American public opinion, it seems clear that we too, the Jews of Quebec, and the other minorities of Quebec are, for the time being, "ambassadors". Because we, for example, as Jews, have a range of personal and institutional relationships at family and community levels throughout North America, and because we are so often in contact with representatives of "American public opinion" (our friends and relatives or professional colleagues), we are in a critical position to "signal" our levels of comfort or discomfort with Quebec society. Therefore, when the day comes that we, as Quebec minorities, are able to tell our American friends and relatives that we feel good about living in Quebec, that we feel confident about living in Quebec, that will perhaps play an even more important role than will all the public relations efforts of the Quebec government in influencing North American public opinion.

This notion of "feeling good about Quebec" is something that needs to be worked on. It needs to be worked on not only by the Government of Quebec which has shown too little concern for and interest in the questions of how the minorities of Quebec feel, but also by the leadership of the minority communities, and in our case, the Jewish community, who need to be much more visibly preoccupied with helping to continue to make the Jewish community of Quebec continue to be, as exciting tomorrow as it was in the past.

#### **Jewish Integration Into the Quebec Majority?**

The Quebec Minister of Cultural Affairs, in an address to an organization promoting links between Quebec and Israel stated:

... In Quebec we have no other objective than this one: to recognize the importance of the Jewish community established with us on the territory of Quebec as well as the toughness of its will to live as a homogeneous group, on the one hand, and, on the other, to invite this community to participate actively in the cultural development of the larger Quebec society which, as a whole, clearly

expresses a new national pride . . . .

. . . In today's context where Quebec society is asserting itself and expressing a new assurance, the Quebec Jewish community must assume its part of this general and lasting phenomenon. Once integrated in Quebec society and sharing the great objectives, the broad consensus, the distinctive cultural behaviour and the pride of being, the Quebec Jewish community will always necessarily have a special message for their compatriots of this country. And this particularity, which is that of another 'minority' than our own on this continent, who has learned to overcome many more obstacles, we would like to hear from it and to understand it—not as a message coming from elsewhere, but as thinking which rises for us and amongst us.

There is no question here of your committing yourself to an irreversible process of total assimilation, quite the contrary. However, it is important that the Jewish community installed in Quebec integrate itself into this country as a community, and that it considers itself rightfully and completely at home here. And integrating oneself means accepting this land as one's own and 'putting one's shoulder to the wheel' of the development of national society whose objectives and lifestyle you accept. Integrating oneself into Quebec society is to accept to live and to build America 'à la Québécoise', with your compatriots and in this land. Your integration means also that you assume the past, the present, and the future of this country as a special way, a different way and eventually a distinct way of being.

Thus to integrate oneself means to participate by sharing solidarity, by keeping one's fundamental originality. For your community, it is to accept to create a true Quebec Jewish community, as national Jewish communities exist in so many countries.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Initial Comfort with "Participatory Non-integration"?**

The message is clear, the message is strong, many Jews feel the message is "much too strong". We are not used to being made to feel

<sup>4</sup> Denis Vaugois, *op.cit.*, p. 8.



“so welcome”. Can the Jews of Quebec “share solidarity” and yet keep their “fundamental originality”? Why do so many Quebec Jews feel that this possibility exists elsewhere in North America, but not in Quebec? The present Quebec government seems to be pushing too hard, too quickly, without the confidence of the Jewish community. Dialogue, mutual understanding, mutual respect, accompanied by a reduction of traditional Jewish community isolation from the life of French Quebec is needed. Is there a level of

balance that can be achieved? True integration may not imply assimilation, but as noted earlier, perhaps we must begin, as Quebec Jews, to feel more comfortable firstly with the notion of “participatory non-integration”. By living together, by getting to know each other, by breaking down generations of insularity, by being able to talk to each other in a common language, we may be able to begin the process, together, feeling that we can continue to make it in Quebec as we did in the past.