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The last angry man

In the beginning they were five, including Professor Trudeau. Now there is one, René Lévesque, preparing for that one final battle

By Peter Desbarats

René Lévesque arrives at a Montreal restaurant only 15 minutes late, apologizing profusely. The man who kept cabinet ministers and political audiences waiting for hours in the Sixties, the nervous and harried Lévesque of those years, seems to have eased up, slowed down and filled out a little. He's 54 years old now, and the youngest of his three children, his only daughter, is a rebellious 20-year-old, almost as restless as her father was at that age. As he talks about her, he shakes his head with the bewilderment of all parents buffeted by the rush of their children into adulthood. Lévesque's children belong to a generation of French Canadians whose political conservatism confounds their elders. For them, René Lévesque is an ancient warrior mumbling about forgotten battles. The opinion polls show that most of them will vote for his party but only as a matter of course, without any sense of rebellion. Only outside Quebec does Lévesque still appear to be a revolutionary. Only in English Canada can he regain some of the excitement of the "quiet revolution" that shook Quebec in the Sixties.

For young French Canadians, Lévesque is a figure from an *ancien régime*. They are growing up in a Quebec that is, for better or worse, more separate from Canada than anyone would have believed possible in 1960. This has been the real "quiet revolution." More than they ever were, French Canadians of Quebec are on their own today, as free as any of us are to decide their own future and to live with the consequences of their decisions. Lévesque has contributed enormously to this, as a journalist, as a cabinet minister, and as a leader who gave political form to the vague ideas about independence that inspired Quebec in the Sixties. Now the concluding chapter is being written, perhaps with a surprise ending that no one could have foreseen when it started. Perhaps René Lévesque will be seen finally, by all Canadians, as a man who showed them how to live together.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HAROLD ROSENBERG

May 16, 1963, was a warm, velvety evening. Gérard Pelletier stood for a few moments on the back porch, savoring the sense of rebirth that compensates northern peoples for their hard winters. But it was too brief. The intensity of the late Canadian spring already seemed to be dissolving into the long, tropical nights of a Montreal summer. Lighting another cigarette, he walked back through the kitchen to rejoin the four men seated around the remains of a late supper in his dining room. René Lévesque was still talking. In the overhead light of the dining room, the dark lines and sallow pouches made him look much older than his 40 years. But he talked with the enthusiasm of a university student, not the deliberation that one might have expected from a senior member of the Quebec cabinet. And he talked. And talked.

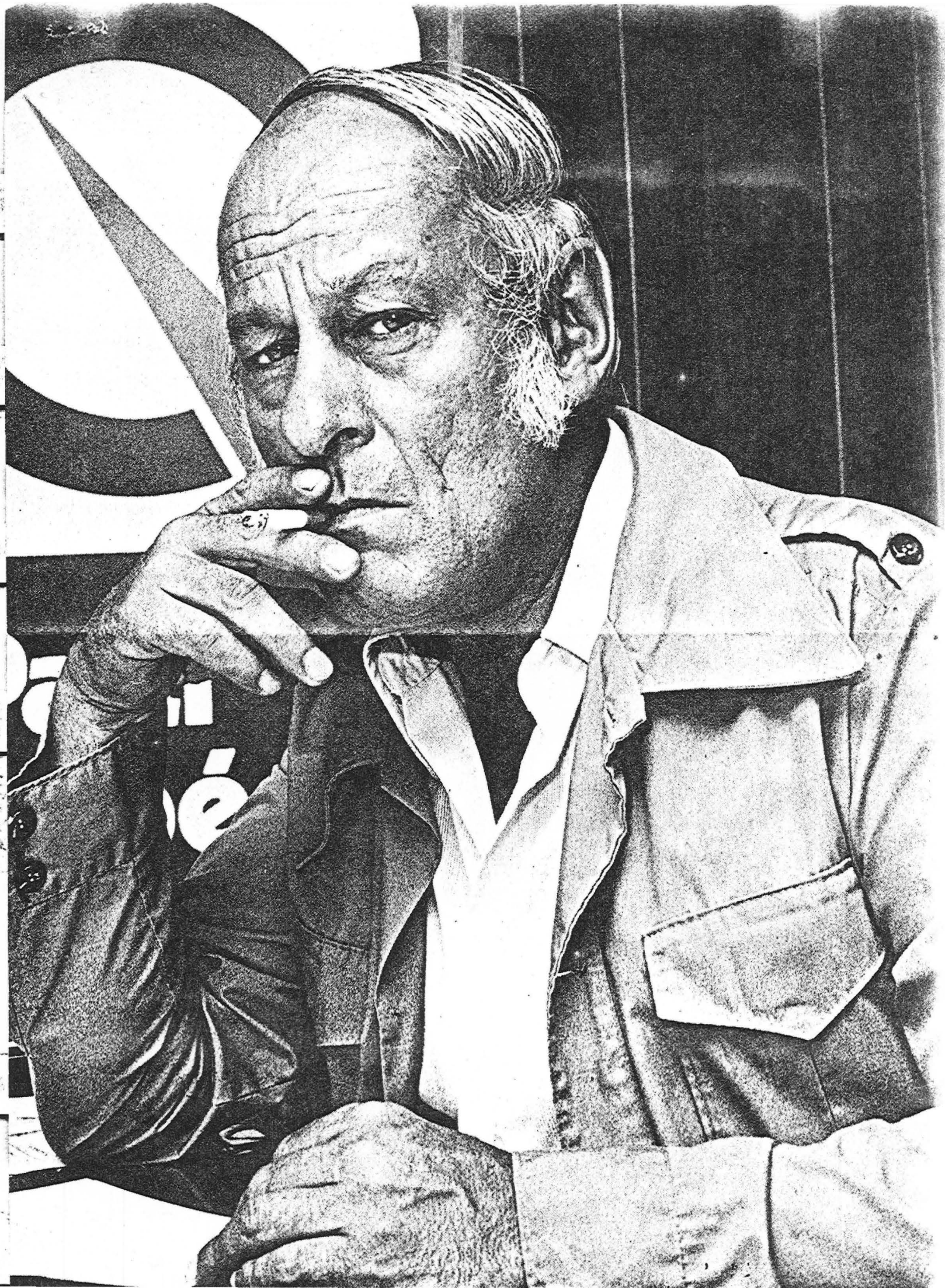
Only Pierre Trudeau, the wealthy law professor from the university of Montreal, was adept at locating the vulnerable spots in that seemingly impenetrable flow. Indeed there had been some doubt, the previous autumn, that the Friday night meetings of the group would continue at all after Trudeau had goaded Lévesque almost to physical violence during an argument about the Quebec government's plan to borrow $300 million to nationalize the province's hydroelectric companies. As Quebec's Minister of Natural Resources, Lévesque was the hero of nationalization—next to Premier Jean Lesage, the central figure in the Quebec election of November, 1962. Nationalization had provided the substance of the Liberal government's campaign slogan: "*Maîtres Chez Nous*" (Masters in Our Own House). Before the campaign, Lévesque had used Trudeau and the others in the group, including labor leader Jean Marchand and newspaper editors Pelletier and André Laurendeau to try out his arguments for nationalization. Eventually he had convinced Pelletier, Marchand and Laurendeau that the hydroelectric take-over was a necessary reform. Only Trudeau had remained skeptical. Despite his socialist commitment to the new federal New Democratic Party, he had argued that there were more productive ways to invest $300 million.

It had been infuriating for Lévesque to encounter the cool, uncommitted skepticism of Pierre Trudeau. Trudeau was one of the aristocrats of Quebec's highly structured society. His socialism had been acquired during a prolonged and comfortable education in the finest schools and universities of Quebec, Britain and France. Lévesque, the son of a country lawyer and a dropout from law school, had fought for his reputation in the competitive world of journalism, and then, in 1960, staked everything on a political career.

Long before that warm May night in 1963, as the conversation carried the group around Pelletier's dining-room table into the early morning hours, relations among the five men had assumed certain patterns. Their responses to one another had become predictable. And perhaps there was a suspicion among them that evening that the group already had served its purpose. From Lévesque's point of view, André Laurendeau was the most valuable member. It had been a great advantage during the fight for nationalization in the cabinet and on the hustings to have had regular access to the editor of the influential *Le Devoir*. Laurendeau was also beginning to be recognized across Canada in the early Sixties as a brilliant analyst of Quebec opinion. He was in the process of developing a concept of a bilingual and bicultural Canadian nationalism that was to become one of the dominant themes of the national debate about Canadian federalism as the decade progressed. The tall, dark-haired, aquiline journalist, who was to die only five years later in the middle of his work as co-chairman of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, had been a critic to whom Lévesque would listen.

By temperament, Jean Marchand was closest to Lévesque. Both men had spent part of their early years in Quebec City, where local society is older, more tightly-knit and more conservative than in Montreal. And they shared an emotional, intuitive approach to politics. It wasn't always necessary for them to reason the life out of a political decision. Marchand and Lévesque were the most vocal members of the Friday night group. Gérard Pelletier, soon to become editor of Montreal's *La Presse*, the largest French-language daily in North America, was adept at setting out problems before the others and preventing the discussions from ranging too far afield. The most detached participant was Trudeau. Other members of the group sometimes wondered if he was even following their conversation. Then the blue

Lévesque: La guerre est (almost) finie

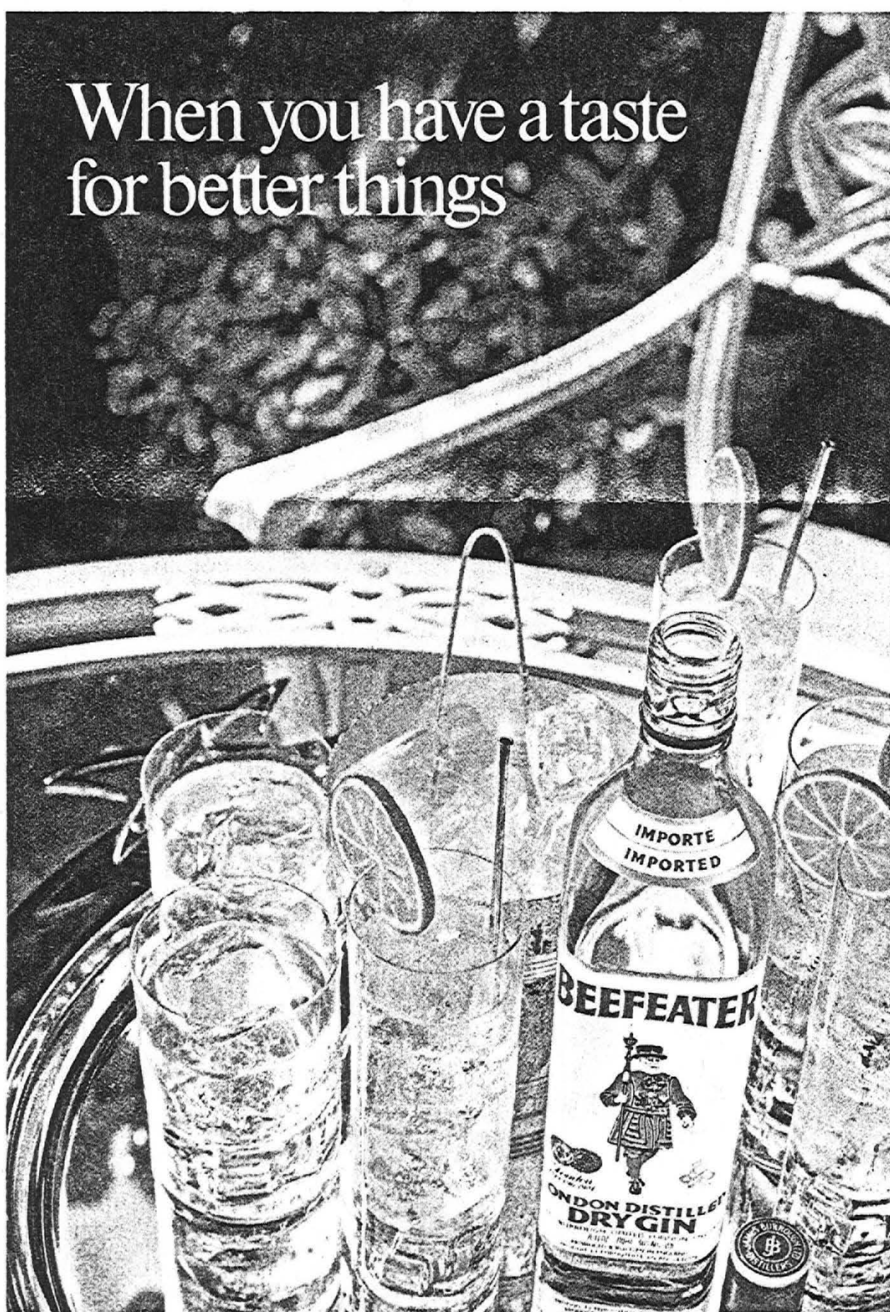


more than six percentage points behind his party. "In any kind of normal political organization with a bit of objectivity," said one of his critics, "you'd look at those figures and say, Jesus, we've got a problém. But that's where the almost religious atmosphere of the PQ comes in. You can talk against Lévesque, but not too openly."

But despite evidence of some dissatisfaction in his own party and among the press and public, opinion polls also show that the Parti Québécois has steadily progressed under Lévesque's leadership. In November, 1974, a poll for *La Presse* by *l'Institut Québécois d'Opinion Publique* showed that 28% of the respondents were in favor of separatism, almost twice the percentage shown by most polls in the Sixties. And this May, a Gallup poll in Quebec showed that 30% of the respondents favored the Parti Québécois compared with 23% in favor of the Liberals. This was the first time that an important poll gave the PQ an edge over the government—perhaps enough of an edge to defeat the government if an election had been held at that time. Dissatisfaction with the Bourassa government appeared to be the major factor in the rising popularity of the Parti Québécois. More than two out of three respondents said that they were dissatisfied with the government. Half the respondents who had voted Liberal in 1973 said that they no longer supported the party, and the largest proportion of them were going over to the Parti Québécois.

The government of Premier Robert Bourassa seemed to be going the way of all governments with unmanageably large parliamentary majorities. Indeed, by this spring two trends were apparent: it looked as if the Bourassa government was well on the way to defeating itself; and the prospect of power was having a sobering effect on the Parti Québécois. In November, 1974, the PQ convention dealt with the referendum issue, deciding finally that a referendum on independence would be an essential step between the election of a Parti Québécois government and a declaration of Quebec independence. The editor of the *Gazette*, Tim Creery, reported that the resolution was steered through the convention by a "Lévesque machine" that operated "with the efficiency of a pop-up toaster." The referendum plank is undoubtedly a popular one for the Parti Québécois—the same 1974 poll that showed 28% of its respondents in favor of separatism also indicated that 83% thought that a referendum should precede a declaration of independence by a Parti Québécois government, and 65% said that more than four years should elapse between the election of a PQ government and a referendum. Within the left wing of the party, opposition to the referendum is still strong. "First, Lévesque says it's going to take six months to organize a referendum," said one of his critics. "Then, a few weeks later, he says, 'What's a year in the life of a nation?' Then, a few weeks later, it's—'Well, two or three years is a normal period for setting up...' And now you're up to four or five years, and it's going to take two elections. The nervousness now is not about the principle of a referendum but about how many people in the party just want to get into office, period! We don't want government for the sake of government." Lévesque himself has warned Quebeckers against jumping to the conclusion that "separatism is dead," as the Prime Minister stated in the spring. In a radio interview shortly before Trudeau's statement, Lévesque said that anyone who thinks that his party will give up independence as its ultimate objective is "daydreaming."

But despite Lévesque's adherence to independence, the question of referendum has confused the electoral picture in Quebec. "Should the PQ ever be brought to power with a minority," said a respected Montreal journalist, "I'm not sure they wouldn't be open to the idea of governing without effecting separation. The referendum hasn't attracted people to the party who would not otherwise be attracted, but it might attract people at an election. There's a real possibility that the PQ would get a lot of non-separatist votes, and some of these voters might be persuaded to join the party after the election." A journalist in the Quebec Press Gallery went even fur-



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ther when he speculated that "the Parti Québécois could end up with 35 members after the next election, and many of them may not be separatists at all."

In the volatile political atmosphere of Quebec today two constants temper speculation about the future of the Parti Québécois: the conservatism of the majority of Quebec voters, and the recuperative powers of the Liberal machine. And yet, many people are looking seriously at the possibility of political changes. Thomas Enders, the new and somewhat unconventional U.S. ambassador in Ottawa, travels quietly to Quebec City for long conversations with Claude Morin [a PQ candidate in the next provincial election] and Jacques-Yvan Morin [PQ House leader], discovering in the latter someone he can reminisce with about student days at Harvard. In the Parliamentary Restaurant in Ottawa one recent day, an Ontario member of the Trudeau cabinet thoughtfully chews over the possibility of an electoral victory for the Quebec separatists. "It wouldn't be the end of the world," he says smoothly. "We've had this Sword of Damocles hanging over our heads since 1960. A victory for Lévesque might be the catharsis we all need. Then we could sit down and have a real negotiation with Quebec."

Lévesque has been in politics for 16 years. His political career began five years before those of Pierre Trudeau, Jean Marchand and Gérard Pelletier. Marchand and Pelletier have now given all they have to give and Trudeau alone remains powerful. But although Lévesque is older in political life than Trudeau, it is Lévesque who now seems to contain the seed of new political life, and who may turn out to be the Canadian who completes the work he, Trudeau, Marchand, Pelletier and Laurendeau started. The idea of René Lévesque negotiating the future of Canada with Pierre Trudeau is too far in the future to be anything but wildly speculative—but how potent that prospect is! Should this ever happen, the two men may hardly recognize one another, remembering instead the early Sixties when they argued night after night about the future of Quebec: Lévesque the dynamic politician testing the limits of his new capability; Trudeau the aloof intellectual still unencumbered by concerns about political tactics. Now the Prime Minister has become the most calculating of politicians, wary and suspicious. It is Lévesque who explores the frontiers of new political territories. But look a bit deeper. In the personalities of the two men, you can glimpse the social reformer who still struggles within the Prime Minister, and the grizzled political veteran who guides Lévesque from within. ✧

This article is excerpted from RENE A Canadian In Search Of A Country, *by Peter Desbarats, being published in October by* McClelland and *Stewart.*