

Helping To Enlighten The "Two Solitudes"



THE STATE OF QUEBEC: A Journalist's View of the Quiet Revolution. By Peter Desbarats. McClelland and Stewart. 188 pp. \$4.95.

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“WHAT do you want?”

That's the question. The question that English Canadians have been posing to French Canadians for the past few years, and especially since the "quiet revolution" has become less quiet.

The question is generally asked with sympathy and genuine curiosity. Other times, however, it is asked aggressively.

It is an overly simplified question that is full of traps. There can be no magic answer, because, even if French Canadians are the most homogeneous group in Canada, they do not form a monolithic bloc.

This is the question that Mr. Peter Desbarats, a newspaper man with *THE MONTREAL STAR* and of an old Montreal family, tries to answer in his book, "The State of Quebec."

Mr. Desbarats recognizes from the very outset, and this is a point that deserves to be stressed, that "the job of explaining Quebec to English Canada falls to a large extent on English-speaking Québécois."

And he does this intelligently in a well-documented work that makes captivating reading.

"What do you want?"

The youthful team at Parti Pris will claim: "A lay and socialist state."

"A free Quebec," is the answer from Pierre Bourgault (head of the RIN) and other separatists.

"Associate States," René Lévesque, minister of Natural Resources in the Lesage Cabinet, will tell you. And Daniel Johnson, leader of the National Union opposition, may agree.

Premier Jean Lesage will answer: "Co-operative Federalism."

"The status quo," will be the answer from others, who, for all practical purposes are closely related to the neo-federalists, such as State Secretary Maurice Lamontagne of the Pearson cabinet.

ONE OF THE characteristics of quiet revolutions is that they resolve their problems without firing a shot, fortunately. But at the same time they cannot be explained in terms of clichés or stereotyped formulas.

Mr. Desbarats does not fall into this trap. Furthermore he understands the ephemeral nature of his work in a Quebec where the landscape is continually shifting. La Belle Province has come a long way from the folkloric epoch of Maria Chapdelaine.

As ironic as this may seem, the awakening of French Canada was prodded by the death, in September, 1959, of Maurice Duplessis, the paternalistic and all-powerful premier, the friend of Anglo-American financiers, the self-styled protector of French Canadian farmers and a man "who was so fond of liberty that he appropriated most of the Four Freedoms to himself exclusively . . ." (Page 77.)

But the collapse of old structures was not pure coincidence. It had been prepared, behind the scenes, for many years. And it is possible to believe that even Paul Sauvé, despite the thaw that he started, would not have been able to deal with the rising tide.

It was time for a change!

This was Jean Lesage's line during the 1960 election campaign that carried him to power. The voters took him and his Liberal team at their word.

NOW IT IS THE politicians, overtaken by events which they had not foreseen, who are trying to soft-pedal or stop the ambitions of a noisy, but very active minority. While it is true that the separatists are only a minority, it is also true that the nationalism which most French Canadians share is perhaps more alive than it has ever been.

As Mr. Desbarats points out: "It is necessary to

say that almost every French Canadian places Quebec before Confederation."

The fact is that Quebec is the only place where the French Canadian feels fully at ease. And it is here that he intends to make the greatest effort to favor the development of his ethnic community without indulging in the isolationism that was necessary after the Conquest.

This is why a whole group of men are at work making up for the time lost during the period of an autonomy used for electioneering purposes by the Taschereau and Duplessis regimes. This new attitude is evident everywhere, but especially in the civil service, education and the business world.

AN INTERESTING CHAPTER in Mr. Desbarats' book is the one dealing with the new civil service and the enthusiasms which impels the development of a provincial policy.

"Quebec," he says, "must be the only place in North America in 1964 where the civil service seems as glamorous as the Foreign Legion . . ."

Renovation is also felt in education. The Parent Report is a more revolutionary document than any separatist manifesto. The commission has called for structural changes in the whole Quebec education system to bring it into line with 20th century conditions in America.

The French-language universities of Quebec are already producing an increasing number of scientists and businessmen who refuse to believe that French Canadians have no talent for science or business. And they would agree with Mr. Desbarats that "the claim that French Canadians and British Canadians in those days (19th century) had equal business opportunities is ridiculous. Cut off from French sources of capital, ruined by inflated paper money in the final years of the French regime, living under an alien government and dependent on British shipping, French Canadian merchants were behind the eight-ball from the time of the Conquest . . ."

The French Canadian businessman knows from the outset that it will not be easy to get through the wall erected by the Anglostocracy of Montreal and Canada (Chapters 3 and 4). Only 6.7 per cent of top management jobs are held by French Canadians. And if he doesn't make it, he will be more and more inclined to turn to the state, the only real political and economic force in French Canada.

"WHAT DO YOU want?"

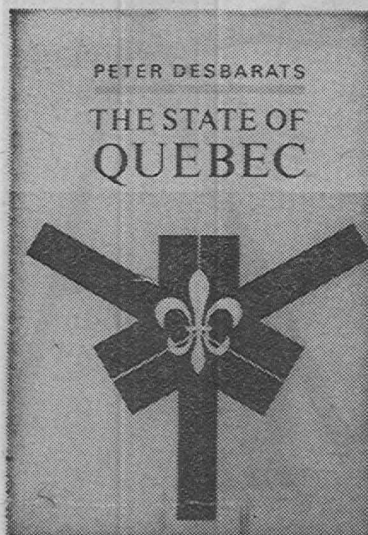
French Canadian moderates — and these still seem to make up the majority—want to occupy, first in Quebec and then in Canada, the positions that they deserve. They are the first to recognize that often they have only themselves to blame if they don't hold them yet.

French Canadian moderates do not believe that Quebec is a province like all the others, and they see in the provincial state a needed counterpoise to the central government which is necessarily dominated by the majority and which, as a result, generally tends to be centralizing.

This, it seems to me, is the impression that emerges from Mr. Desbarats' book, which, on this basis, helps to enlighten the "Two Solitudes" that have endured in this country for two centuries, especially in Montreal where two cultures have managed to live side by side without really trying to understand each other.

I believe that Mr. Desbarats has presented the views of French Canada to his English-language readers in a lucid way. French Canadians who read his book may become acquainted with a world—the English Canadian world—which they also tend to see in terms of clichés and stereotyped formulas.

There is, it seems, a lot of ignorance on both sides of the "Two Solitudes."



Peter Desbarats