



WHAT YOUNG FRENCH CANADIANS HAVE ON THEIR MINDS

BY PETER GZOWSKI

"WHAT HAS CHANGED is that there are more educated people, more people able to express themselves with more means of expressing themselves. There was in, say, 1936, not a single French Canadian on the stock exchange who could have made the point about wanting to work in his own language."

The words are those of Gérard Pelletier, aged forty-three, a former union worker who is now editor of the big Montreal daily newspaper, *La Presse*. He was speaking to the *Maclean's* panel you see above—five young French Canadians and one bilingual English Canadian, with Pelletier in the chair. *Maclean's* brought them together to talk about themselves, the younger generation in Quebec. We asked Pelletier to have them discuss such mat-

ters as their relationship with the church, their attitude toward business and their liking for—or dislike of — English-speaking Canadians. Their conversation, which was recorded in French, went on for more than two hours. Later, many of the points they raised were thrashed out less formally over cocktails and dinner. I sat in on both sessions, and this report is taken from the tape, from notes of my later conversation, and written against the background of half a hundred similar conversations I took part in during a recent year I spent in Quebec.

The young people on the panel are not "typical" of all young French Canadians. They're not intended to be. They are, for one thing, much better educated than any cross section of their own generation, which is between twenty-

five and thirty-five, would be. They are the people "able to express themselves" whom Pelletier was talking about, and what they have to say is of vital importance to all of Canada. This is the generation that is just below the rim of power in Quebec. A decade or so from now, it will take over. These young people did not forge what is often called the "quiet revolution" in their province—men like Pelletier did that—but they are the ones who will carry it on. It will be up to them, and of course to their counterparts in English Canada, whether the two races that made Confederation nearly a hundred years ago can carry it successfully past its current troubled period.

None of the people on our panel are separatists, although it would have been eminently easy to find enough separatists of the right age

When all the talk about whether Confederation can be saved is over, the people who will have to make it work are the young adults of today—most particularly the French. What are they like? How do they feel about the church? Nationalism? Business? Us? Here, in a *Maclean's* panel, five of them, with one *Anglais* for leaven, speak out

to fill every spot. We chose instead to set down the views of people who have not given up on Confederation, who feel they have as much interest as any Canadian in making the deal work. Yet our panelists are, virtually without exception, "angry"—in the sense that the Angry Young Men of Great Britain were angry a few years ago: they're not happy with the way things are going now and they want to change them.

The point about working in one's own language, which Pelletier commented on, for instance, was made by Robert Demers, a twenty-five-year-old law graduate who *does* work on the Montreal Stock Exchange. "French Canadians will see to it that in the next few years French becomes a necessary language for business in Quebec," Demers said. "We have tremendous

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ALBERT BRETON
ECONOMIST:

*"In our way of life, we
are really Americans"*



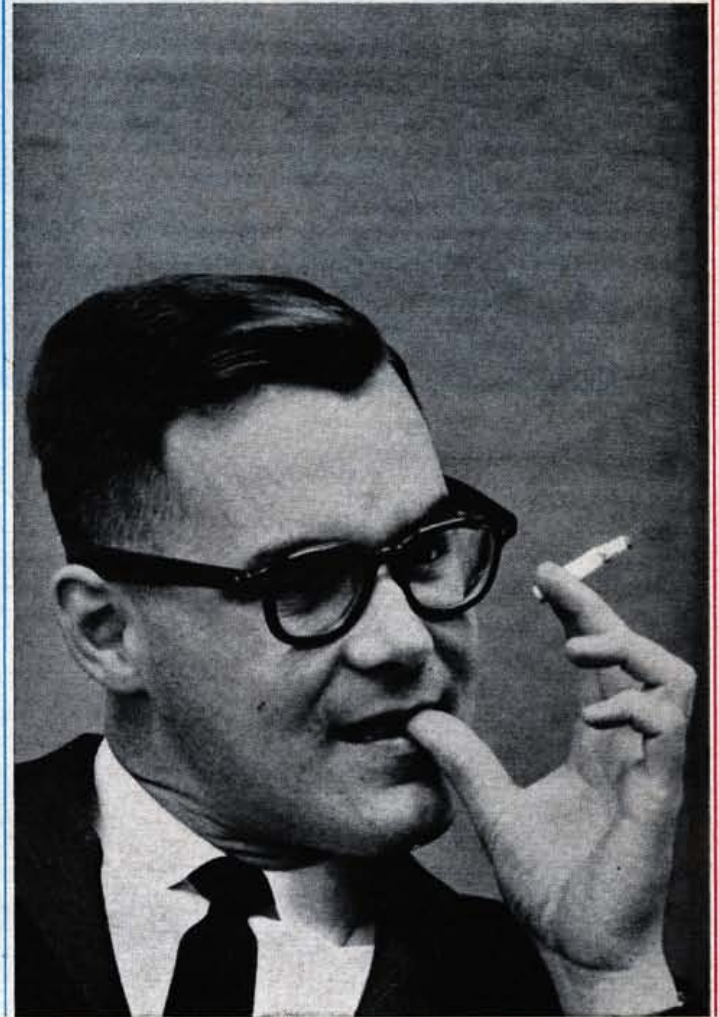
ROBERT DEMERS
BUSINESSMAN:

*"Rationally, I am a
Canadian, but
in my heart my
allegiance is to Quebec"*



JULIEN CHOUINARD
LAWYER:

*"Our generation is much
too preoccupied with
the future to centre
its interest on the past"*



"My students seem to be entirely preoccupied with money"

continued steps to take. Even in a city like Three Rivers where ninety-seven percent of the population is French, I believe the administration of American companies, or English-Canadian ones, is carried out in English. I don't think young French Canadians are ready to accept the fact that just because we're in a big confederation the whole administration of industry in Quebec should be in English."

Demers has many characteristics of a new breed in French Canada—a breed significantly unlike French Canadians as they have been thought of in earlier years. He is fluently bilingual, articulate, ambitious, practical. He was at his best in the tape-recorded discussion

when the talk turned to business.

On the same subject, Julien Chouinard, a Rhodes scholar who now practises law in Quebec City and lectures at Laval University, had this to say: "We do have a long way to go until the road to success in business is as open to French Canadians as it is to English-speaking ones. If we could get more control of business in our own province, French Canadians would seize the opportunities to advance. They'd show more interest in business. We do have an interest in it now, but we're discouraged by the difficulties in getting ahead."

Pelletier then asked the others what they thought inhibited French Canadians in business.

Demers said: "It seems to me we have always been good at *starting* businesses, but when it comes to amalgamating several small companies and making one good average one, which potentially could become a big thriving enterprise, that's where we fail. There are lots of small industries and small companies in Quebec."

Chouinard: "Isn't it a lack of capital that has produced this situation?"

Demers: "There's been a real change in the past two or three years. I think seventy-five percent of the French Canadian companies that are listed now on the stock exchange have come on in that time."

Madeleine Gobeil, a school teacher (she teaches literature at the only *collège classique* in Quebec that isn't entirely staffed by the clergy) was able to underline the growing economic interests of the younger French Canadians too. "My students seem to be entirely preoccupied with money," she said. "They are always asking me questions like: 'Did Stendhal have much money?' They're fascinated by it, which seems foreign to me. They want power and they see the way to get power is through money."

Miss Gobeil represents another kind of new breed in French Canada. Like many people who matured in Quebec after World War II, she has spent much of her time as

JEAN DAVID
JOURNALIST:

"I'd be bored to death to be an English Canadian"



MADELEINE GOBEIL
TEACHER:

"I would like French Canadians to be a little more competent and less attached to the church"



PETER WHITE
LAW STUDENT:

"When we organized a conference on Confederation, word got out that all the English-speaking students at Laval were separatists"



a young adult in France. Without being affected, her French sounds more Parisian than what we who don't speak French well call Quebecois. (An aside: Few myths dear to the hearts of English Canadians arouse the anger of these bright young people more than the one that they all speak bad, or *patois*, French. They feel that most of the people who tell them they do—and as one who learned his lesson the hard way I agree—do so because their own French isn't good enough to understand them. In fact, the kind of people represented on this panel probably speak French "better" than their contemporaries in other parts of Canada speak English, in the sense that their language is closer to the standard tongue in modern France than ours is to the standard in modern England.)

Miss Gobeil fits neither the

cliché about the shy, family-dominated young *canadienne* who wants only to be married and have a dozen children or the one about the gay, champagne-drinking flirt. She is serious, clever, frank and, above all, emancipated. She is, for example, unafraid to say publicly that she no longer believes in her church.

"Unafraid" is the right word, too. In the less formal conversation that followed the panel, Jean David, who is a journalist (he is an assistant news editor of Pelletier's paper, *La Presse*) and a former national president of the Young Liberals, described leaving the church—which he has done—as "the most important decision a young French Canadian can make."

Some others in the group joined in with loud and bitter denuncia-

tions of the way the church has been able to dominate so much of French Canadian life—even to the point, in some small towns, where a merchant might be nearly boycotted if he became known as a militant non-believer.

"But even that is changing," Robert Demers said. "I was told when I finished law school that if I ever took a divorce case I couldn't practise law in Quebec. That was only a few years ago, and I have gone into business instead of practising law at all, but I know young lawyers recently who have taken divorce cases and nothing has happened to the rest of their practice."

During the tape-recorded discussion, David said: "I think what distinguishes us from preceding generations is that we're not prepared to accept religion the way it's been laid down in French Canada.

We're asking ourselves if we can't have a spiritual life outside the Roman Catholic church. For a long time there have been Catholics in name only in Quebec, but they stayed on—in name only—out of fear."

Demers: "I think there is a profound indifference to religious life among the people who are coming out on top. There was a survey at the University of Montreal not long ago, and it found that eighty-five percent of the students said they were believers. But if you look at the leaders of the various student groups, and the editors of their publications and things like that, you'll find that almost invariably they belong to the other fifteen percent."

During this part of the discussion, Pelletier, who is, like many of the men

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