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## La Francophonie: Is it Franco-Phoney?

PARIS, France

July 20, 1999

*A Mountain in want of a child  
Produced such clamor  
That all upon hearing came  
Thinking that she would deliver  
A city bigger than Paris.  
She gave birth to a mouse.  
When I come to think of this fable,  
A false story but true in meaning,  
I imagine an author saying:  
"I will chant the war that the Titans  
Waged on the Lord of Thunder."  
Such promise, but what comes of it?  
Wind.*

— *La Montagne qui accouche* (The Mountain In Labor), by Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695).

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

British and American diplomats have a special and impolite term to describe the sometimes erratic and apparently illogical behavior of the French in diplomatic circles and in their relationships with the world. They call it: "frogging around." The funny thing is that the Americans and the British think that this "frogging around" is a behavior particularly aimed at them. As a matter of fact, the French "frog around" with anyone, as shows the story of *La Francophonie*.

The *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* — La Francophonie, for short — is a sort of French Commonwealth that is just beginning to make its presence felt, internationally, after three decades of obscurity. Headquartered in Paris, its Secretary-General is Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who formerly held the same title at the United Nations. La Francophonie's 52 member countries rank in size from France to Monaco, with Canada, Belgium and Switzerland in the richer tier, and Haiti, Burkina Faso and Rwanda in the basement. The organization was created in 1971 to promote and defend the French language through educational programs and technology transfers. Under the impetus of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, it is becoming a sort of international pressure group promoting multilingualism in all international forums and organizations, for the open purpose of resisting the trend toward English as the *lingua franca* of the world.

Optimists say that La Francophonie is the French language's command ship in the global battle for international stature. Realists say it is but an Ark built at the last minute before the English flood. Pessimists say La Francophonie is a boat the French are missing badly.

La Francophonie may succeed as a durable political organization partly because Boutros Boutros-Ghali intends to speak not only for French, but also for

## La Francophonie 52-Member Countries



all ill-organized linguistic groups (Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese). But La Francophonie may fail in the long run as a promoter of the French language, partly because the numbers are not right, partly because it fights an uphill battle, but mostly because the French will have “frogged around” for too long.

At first, I got interested in La Francophonie because I thought it would shed some light on the opaque thinking behind French foreign policy. La Francophonie, I thought, would show *how* the French resist globalization — *why* was another question. It was with this in mind that I attended a round table organized by the Canadian embassy in Paris on the topic of Francophonie to listen to a distinguished panel of linguists, artists and politicians. Luckily, less than three weeks later, the Finance Ministers of La Francophonie nations met in Monaco.

Three dozen interviews and four days of conference later, it became obvious that La Francophonie’s main problem was France. This was a much more interesting way of looking at it. Next to European relations, “La

Francophonie is the essential tool of French diplomacy,” says Denis Tillinac, publisher and personal representative of President Chirac for La Francophonie from 1995 to 1997. “But France is not as involved as it should be.”

Despite their obsession with the “Anglo-Saxons” and the “American Empire,” the French pay little more than lip service to La Francophonie, both in their institutions and in daily life. The French have a hard time welcoming Francophones<sup>1</sup> who question and challenge, and who are a constant reminder that things could have been different. In fact, France’s entire colonial history testifies to profound indecision, lack of vision and mediocre interest in anything beyond its shores that is at the root of the poor dissemination of French abroad, as well as the internal problems of La Francophonie.

But to understand why the French persist in an attitude they cannot afford, I propose to examine La Francophonie by beginning with prehistory. I hope the reader will forgive me for going back 400 years, but listening to the round table and later to interviewees, I was

<sup>1</sup> Yet, the term francophonie was, in spirit, generous. It was French geographer, Onésime Reclus, who coined the term in the late 1870s in a pioneering survey of world languages. Francophonie refers to all who speak French, as opposed to “The French,” which describes the “French from France.” French speakers are Francophones. Like it or not, English-speakers are Anglophones, not Anglo-Saxons. This terminology is widely used in Quebec, for instance, but has little currency for the French, which still speaks of Anglo-Saxons, an odd way of referring to Jessie Jackson or Salman Rushdie, for instance. The concept extends to Spanish-speakers (Hispanophones), Portuguese-speakers (Lusophones), Russian-speakers (Russophones), and even Chinese (Sinophones).

filled with a feeling of déjà-vu, as if history was repeating itself.

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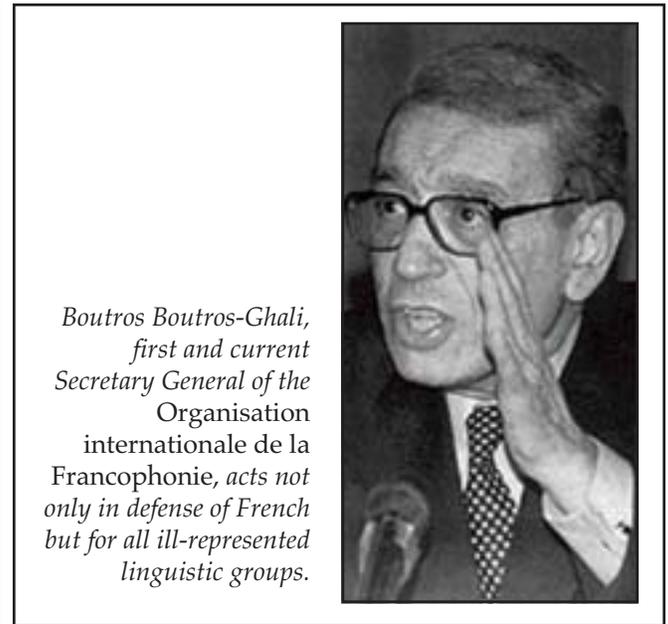
Perusing French history textbooks, I was much surprised to discover that they hardly refer to New France, except for a few dates and names. One reason is that this Canadian part of France's glorious history is not all glorious. More importantly, it is easy to blame the relative decline of French on American hegemony, as it takes the spotlight off France as the cause of its own demise.

The facts are mind-boggling. All Quebec history students know this simple fact: France sent no more than 8,000 colonists to New France throughout 160 years of colonization. Eight thousand! By the end of the Seven-Year War in 1763, the population of New France was 85,000 as opposed to 1.6 million English-speakers in New England.<sup>2</sup> Another way of looking at it: one Frenchman in 300 lived in New France, compared to one Englishman in six. Yet consider that France was the superpower of the time, that it had three times the population base of England and that it controlled all major waterways of the New World. You can appreciate the extent of the failure.

To put it mildly, France's heart was not in colonizing. It did not help that until 1663, most of the effort was



*One of my first trips outside of Paris was a pilgrimage to the little village of Genouillac, where 13 generations ago my ancestor, Joseph-Hosanny Nadeau, left to board a ship bound for New France, Canada in 1648.*



*Boutros Boutros-Ghali, first and current Secretary General of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, acts not only in defense of French but for all ill-represented linguistic groups.*

granted to companies that were given fur monopolies in exchange for the obligation of delivering three to six colonists per ship. Since these deliveries cost money, the companies brought as few colonists as they could: fewer than 20, some years. The only exception was Louis XIV (1643-1715), who correctly judged that the colony was important, strategically, and moved in 2,500 colonists during the first 15 years of his reign. But he soon fell back into the old continental reflex, and New France sank to the bottom of the agenda. Meanwhile the Brits were not even counting how many were on their ships, nor how many ships there were. Their colonization effort was done any old how.

Furthermore, French colonists needed authorization to migrate. Those with bad pedigrees, like Protestants, were barred. When Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1683, half-a-million Huguenots migrated to Switzerland, the Netherlands and England. France was already a very centralized state at the time, managing all local affairs from the center — which explains why each Nadeau, Belanger, Blais, Thibault, Bernier, Bureau, Trudeau, Chétien, Cloutier, Lacroix, and the like, can trace their ancestry back to the very village whence they came.

France "lost" New France in 1763 after military defeats both in Europe and in the colony. The defeat in Europe was the decisive one, not the outcome on Canada's Plains of Abraham. The Brits, fearing they would not be able to hold the area militarily as agitation was growing in the 13 colonies, proposed a deal to the French: give us the sugar islands and we will give you back New France. The French said no, and North America became British. Voltaire is famous for having written: "Who needs those acres of snow?" Indeed, who? Contrary to the situation in New France, the production of the Sugar Islands was

<sup>2</sup> In *The Old Regime and The Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville also noted this detail, but he is not much read in France.

not redundant to that of France. Besides, beaver fur had gone out of fashion in Paris and rabbit, which could be home raised, was in. Fashion was the downfall of New France.

To be sure, the sun has definitely set on the British Empire, and the United States now holds the upper hand. It just so happens that Americans use the same language, thus reinforcing the global influence of English. But what appears to be a historical accident was not. Britain's co-



*A guest of Quebec during the 1967 Montreal Expo, President Charles de Gaulle proclaimed, "Vive le Québec libre!" Today, with respect to Canadian politics, France's official policy is "non-indifference, non-interference." Whatever that means.*

lonial policy resulted in four countries (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) for a total of 360 million people. France: 130 million in 52 countries, and you really have to add up the scrapings to get that total. In terms of population and language, Quebec remains the most successful ex-colony. But this is nowhere near what France could have done if it had got its act together in time.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

This is the history of Francoworld as not told in French history textbooks.<sup>4</sup> With La Francophonie, the French are reproducing the exact behavior that brought the downfall of their colonial policy: if it doesn't cater to immediate needs, they back into it.

Early on in my research, I discovered that La Francophonie was not an idea of the French, but of African and Quebec leaders. But it was a real surprise to find that the French rejected the idea altogether when it was broached. Logically, the idea of a French Commonwealth sounds exactly like a de Gaulle brainchild. Indeed, President Charles de Gaulle, who ran France from 1958 to 1969, aggressively asserted France's "mission to civilize" in order to maintain her international prestige against the forces of Angloworld. But de Gaulle, of all people, was the one who refused to hear anything about an institutional Francophonie.

De Gaulle's reasoning is perfectly opaque, especially in light of the fact that he did all he could to promote a Free Quebec. How then could he be against La Francophonie? On the one hand, he saw La Francophonie and French grandeur as two things, even opposite. For grandeur's sake, France had to stand on its own, without the support of former colonies, which is what a French Commonwealth is, in spirit. In a way, La Francophonie was reminder of those humiliating years when Free France could not have survived without its colonies. What mattered in his promotion of a Free Quebec was less Free Quebec than the grandeur of proclaiming it, which is really about France. At the same time, the de-colonization of Vietnam and Algeria had been traumatic. The French Left regarded the notion of a French Commonwealth as

<sup>3</sup> It was a political deal that allowed "the Canadians," as were called the inhabitants of ex-New France, to go forth and multiply in spite of British occupation. At the time, agitation was growing in the 13 colonies, and the British had few ships and troops to allocate to New France. Understanding this, the Catholic church made a proposition the Brits could not refuse: we run Canada and keep the peasants quiet, but you allow Catholics to hold offices. The Brits said yes, thus granting the Catholics of New France rights that British Catholics did not have. The Brits liked the formula so much that they granted Canada a Parliament as early as 1791. This is how the British came to practice the Protectorate system in New France, a model they reproduced in all of their later colonies with success. Meanwhile, the French kept extracting and managing from above. They also sent school teachers to teach the "savages" all they needed to know about the French language and France. Until recently, school books in African countries began with the famous phrase: "Our ancestors, the Gauls..."

<sup>4</sup> Language may seem a cultural byproduct of the colonial era, and it may well be, but this is not taking into consideration that it followed the colonist just as closely as religion. Language, at the time, was a definite tool of the French State as a means to reinforce its hold on the different regions of France. For this analysis, I am indebted to a book that studied the dissemination of English, *The Story of English*, by Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert McNeil. BBC Books, 1986, revised 1992. Do not assume that I downplay the horrors of colonialism, but this is a study of purposes, which is a different matter.



*A ferry leaves Marseille for Algeria, France's biggest colonizing catastrophe. The decolonization was so violent and the peace so poorly negotiated that France had to evacuate one million pieds-noirs, descendants of French and European colonists.*

a form of neo-colonialism. De Gaulle, who was a master of compromise, canned La Francophonie to appease his left.

La Francophonie was off to a pretty bad start without the French, who make up half its numbers, but Africans and Quebeckers managed to convince them. Both had common interests in the defense of a Francoworld. African leaders of newly independent countries realized that they still needed a *lingua franca* to run their extremely fragmented societies. In addition, the French language carries more weight at the UN than Wolof. As for Quebec, nationalists simply sought an international arena and markets other than North America.<sup>5</sup>

The framework of institutional Francophonie was created in 1970 under the name of the *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique* (The Agency for Technical and Cultural Cooperation). Its charter was the result of an international treaty among 26 countries. The Agency's purpose was to promote and defend French through technology transfers and cooperation programs in education, culture, agriculture and energy. It organized conferences for ministers of Culture, Education and Agriculture. It was also responsible for controlling the activities of a few other international organizations, like international French television, TV5, and AUPELF-UREF, an international network of 350 French-language universities.

But the Agency remained obscure and lame, with no clear idea of its direction and purpose, and could never pull itself together. Notice the conspicuous absence of the word "Francophonie" in its name. The first Chiefs of State conference, in 1986, was called *Conférence des Chefs d'État et de Gouvernement Ayant en Commun l'Usage du*

*Français* (literally: Conference of Heads of States and of Governments Sharing French as a Language). This clumsy denomination is ample proof that La Francophonie did not want to assert itself and that the French somehow remained reluctant.

Compared to his predecessors, President François Mitterrand (1981-95) was a gung-ho Francophone, as well as a prestige-monger, and he intensely lobbied to hold this first heads-of-states Summit. For the next 12 years, the Agency for Technical and Cultural Cooperation became even more scattered while the mediocre Summits produced little more than the next Summit's date. To do them justice, the assembled leaders debated the purpose of La Francophonie all the while. Should La Francophonie be called La Francophonie? Should it care only about language, culture and technology? Should it be a French Commonwealth? Or a club within the UN? Or even a French UN?

In the early 1990s, the French realized at long last that La Francophonie could be a lever of French foreign policy. At the UN, Francophone countries were already forming a bloc. But the turnaround came as a consequence of France's isolation during the Uruguay Round of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, now the World Trade Organization) that lasted from 1988 to 1992. During those talks, barriers and tariffs for cultural products like cinema, books and arts in general and protection for intellectual property were hotly negotiated. But the French pushed the concept of *Exception culturelle* — by which cultural products would be excluded from the list of normal merchandise by virtue of being cultural, and therefore were protectible by subsidies and barriers. The French won the day when the European Union

<sup>5</sup> This kind of political calculation is common. Vietnam joined La Francophonie in order to get a smile from the IMF and World Bank. Egypt was ostracized by other Arab countries after Camp David and looked for a way to rekindle friendships. Bulgaria, Moldavia, Albania and Macedonia were trying to boost their candidacy for the European Union. Nigeria, which was ostracized by The Commonwealth, is now flirting with Francophonie to break diplomatic isolation.

rallied to their side. At the 1993 Summit in Mauritius, the Heads of States of La Francophonie also declared themselves in favor of *l'Exception culturelle*.

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La Francophonie finally proclaimed itself in 1997 at the Hanoi Summit, when the Heads of states created the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* and chose Boutros-Ghali as its Secretary-General. His personal history is a program in itself. This intellectual, who masterminded the Camp David Accord as head of Egyptian diplomacy and who became head of the UN in 1992, regards himself as Arabophone, Anglophone and Francophone. Interestingly enough, he explains that although the British formally controlled Egypt, the Egyptian bourgeoisie adopted French and its culture — particularly in universities, law and art — in part because of the French presence at the Suez canal, and in part simply as a counterweight to British influence.<sup>6</sup>

Thanks to Boutros-Ghali, La Francophonie is now an organization recognized by the UN. It militates for the preservation of French at the Olympics and at the International Standard Organization (ISO). Finance ministers of La Francophonie met this April for the first time in Monaco to discuss cooperation and prepare a position



*La Francophonie almost miscarried in 1970 because France insisted that there would be no Francophonie without Quebec. Canada accepted reluctantly, but later pulled a joker of its own by insisting that the province of New Brunswick be also represented on grounds that it is the only officially-bilingual province of Canada.*

for the biannual Head of states summit next September (in Moncton, New-Brunswick), and for the Seattle Round of the World Trade Organization, to begin in November 1999. For that purpose, La Francophonie signed a cooperation accord with UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), the UN's club for very poor countries. "We will develop commercial diplomacy for those countries and a French network of information on the topic," says UNCTAD's General Secretary, Rubens Ricupero, an habitu e at sensitive backroom talks at the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. Aside from purely linguistic considerations, La Francophonie has begun acting as a mediator in African conflicts and has suspended all direct cooperation with the government of Niger in the wake of the assassination of its president last spring.



*During the Monaco conference of La Francophonie's Finance Ministers, Boutros Boutros-Ghali and French Finance Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn spoke to journalists.*

In light of La Francophonie's goal of defending and promoting French, the organization has often been ridiculed for extending its membership to countries where French is hardly spoken — like Bulgaria and Moldavia. For the Hanoi summit in 1997, the 1,500 Vietnamese staff had to take crash courses in French! Rather, this extension is a clear indi-

<sup>6</sup> This kind of attitude is not at all exceptional. For instance, the Latin American bourgeoisie was strongly francophile for a century and a half as means of rejecting Spanish, and later British and American. It also works the other way. For instance, the Tutsi who took power in Rwanda in the wake of the massacres have adopted the English language as a means of rejecting the French and Belgian influence that had supported the Hutu.



*The Agence de la Francophonie is located on the west side of Paris. For 29 years, this working arm of the organization has run education and cooperation programs and coordinated the activities of TV-5 and the international network of French universities.*

cation that La Francophonie is becoming a genuine clone of The Commonwealth, in its own way (see accompanying text #1).

As personal representative of Mitterrand to La Francophonie, Jean Mattysens was one of the intellectual sources of political Francophonie. He recalls that "the Vietnamese president once said to me, 'You can have French culture without the language because of law, literature, art, industry, technology. France, Italy and Spain are Latin countries, but who speaks Latin?'" Mattysens thinks the future of La Francophonie does not depend on the French language. "Political Francophonie exists: Francophonie countries tend to make a bloc at the UN. It is the institutions that will drive the language, not the contrary."

Only time will tell if La Francophonie is too political for its own good. It may be, in fact, its only strength. La Francophonie is so devoid of economic reflex that there was no businessman in any delegation at the Monaco conference, which was about economic and commercial cooperation! If one judges by the effective influence of France, being political may not necessarily be a weakness (see accompanying text #2).

Isn't La Francophonie trying to do too much with too little? Its 1.1-billion-franc budget (U.S.\$160 million) is impressive, but small in light of the hundreds of programs it is funding. The issue remains unresolved. At the Canadian embassy's round table, Robert Chaudenson, a professor of linguistics at the University of Provence and an authority on Creole and French Pidgin, led the charge. "Focus on language and broadcasting, and scrap the rest! How can a communiqué from La Francophonie on turmoil in the African Great Lakes area re-

verse the collapse of African schools? French may be wiped out of Africa in 30 years, maybe less. Five per cent of Africans speak French, essentially the élite. If we lose Africa, French becomes a non factor."

Institutional Francophonie has other real weaknesses to overcome. Intellectual posturing is one. Francophone leaders, especially the French, have the bad habit of insisting on the innate virtue of the French language. Promoting a language is honorable enough, but arguing, and believing, that the French language predisposes its speakers to some moral qualities of solidarity, democracy and universality is imbecilic if not dangerous. French certainly was the language of the Enlightenment, but this had to do with circumstance, not nature. There is no innate morality to any language: German was the language of Hitler and Beethoven. French was spoken by Voltaire and Maréchal Pétain, not to mention the dozens of petty dictators that ran Francophone countries from Haiti to Guinea.

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The real weakness of La Francophonie comes from France's unsteady course, this mix of reluctance and ambiguity called "frogging around." A generous mind may



*As the personal representative of President François Mitterrand, Jean Mattysens helped establish a political Francophonie. He is very disillusioned with the French government; "Their ambiguity remains La Francophonie's biggest challenge."*

argue that this attitude stems from a conservative culture and extreme divisiveness. It is true, as the old joke goes, that two Brits meeting in the street will queue, whereas two Frenchmen will argue — and if a Frenchman is alone, he will split in two. France's excessive centralization can be fantastically efficient when all the parts want to move in tune. But the smallest petty bureaucrat can bring the entire system to a halt for irrelevant reasons.

Although La Francophonie is now going the way the French want, insiders still feel resistance, if not ambivalence, in the *République*. For the record, all Ministers and civil servants interviewed say, with splendid unanimity, that the French cannot possibly be ambiguous since they contribute most of the budget. The Prime Minister has a Minister of La Francophonie and the President is advised by a High Council for La Francophonie. But in the anterooms, the French are derided as *Les nuls de la Francophonie* (La Francophonie's losers). One case in point: in 1997, when newly-elected Prime Minister Jospin created his cabinet, someone realized at the last minute that he had forgotten to nominate a minister for La Francophonie. As an afterthought, he gave the office to the minuscule Ministry for Cooperation, itself a branch of Foreign Affairs — apparently forgetting that at the time of Mitterrand, the Minister of La Francophonie stood on his



Philippe Quéau, of UNESCO, tried to persuade the French government to publish the French classics of literature on the Internet for free. The government said yes, but a civil servant blocked the whole process.

own. Every single backroom operator I spoke to has an anecdote of the kind.

The French are very creative when it's time to "frog around." Philippe Quéau was a leader in the science of artificial intelligence in France before he joined UNESCO as head of its computer-development program. When he heard that La Francophonie wanted to develop an Internet program, he lobbied the French government. Would they pay to put the classics of French literature like Balzac, Victor Hugo, Molière, on-line for free? The Prime Minister said *oui*. The National Library said *oui*. The Minister of Culture said *oui* too. But when they all got together with Quéau to discuss it, the Ministry of Culture said *non*, without reason. It took months for Quéau to figure out that one civil servant had objected on grounds that French book publishers feared the loss of sales. "Three years later, nothing has happened," says Quéau. "They profess Francophonie, they want to develop Internet, but they refuse to disseminate our culture."

According to one bureaucrat I spoke with, the French bureaucracy is plagued by a strong streak of defeatism. Many departments of the government are afflicted with such Anglomania that some bureaus of Foreign Affairs, for instance, once requested that staff write memos in English — even when they did not know how! This doesn't happen anymore, but many French intellectuals and bureaucrats think that French is *ringard*, corny, and that promoting or defending it is a waste of time. "The future for them is America," explained the bureaucrat. This has much the sound of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Should we wonder if, for a long time, French public-radio's budget for international broadcasting was the first to be cut, systematically, even in the years of De Gaulle, who was so keen on France's mission to civilize?<sup>7</sup>

Another type of French bureaucrat has a blinding fear of being dominated. Again, consider Internet: La Francophonie decided some years ago that Internet technology should be developed in Africa. It is in fact one of the best-funded most successful programs of La Francophonie, and it works fine in spite of obvious technical obstacles. African countries even contribute financially! What the French did not like, though, was that Quebeckers control the entire program. It did not matter to them that only Quebeckers had a good grasp of Internet, in French to boot! The French dragged out their decision to cooperate for months and months. This pattern is repeated every time Canadian want to develop a program for cultural, agricultural or technological development in Africa. The French resist Canadians efforts because they see Canadians as the Americans' Trojan Horse. More simply, Canadians are playing on French turf. "The French will discourage any good will just when it's needed most," explains Denis Tillinac. "This kind of

<sup>7</sup> *Le Mal Français* (The French Problem), by Alain Peyrefitte. The example is taken from page 77.

*couillonnage* (swindling) has to stop. Why can't the French understand that France, as the biggest Francophone country, would benefit from any development in the long run, whoever does it?"

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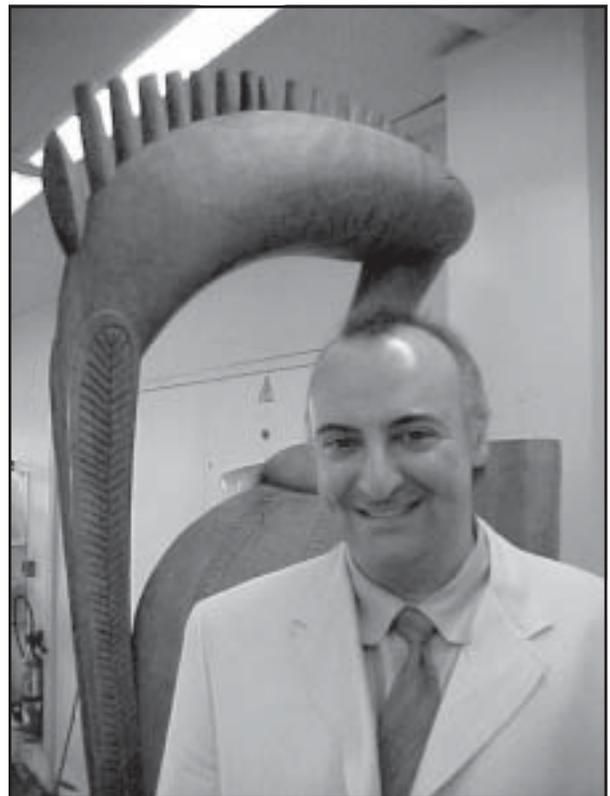
All these weaknesses and causes point in one direction, toward one collective flaw: the French have never cured themselves of the idea that they are the world. Only the tip of an iceberg shows and the tip of this misconception is language.

During one of my Sunday hikes, I got into an argument with a woman about accents. She was convinced that she did not have one. It may sound like a cliché but it really is true: the French do not readily admit that their version of French is simply the regionalism of the majority. Blame it on education, but they regard other Francophones as an inferior order of Frenchness. This doesn't change just because you create something called Francophonie.

I have mentioned in a previous report how impolite it is for the French to talk about money, their own or others'. However, they will openly laugh at people's grammar mistakes or non French accents. One day I arrived at the counter of a department store and addressed one of the three receptionists. Hearing my accent, the two other pretended to hold back their laughter, which is more humiliating than laughing openly. The French consider any French other than their own as hillbilly talk. They view whatever pertains to language as the property of France. The *Académie française* created the French language: it would take a century to transform it into an *Académie de la Francophonie*, and a millennium to change the attitude.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of Francophonie goes against the very grain of the French. France has done all it could over the last 500 years to eradicate any kind of regionalism within its borders, with greater success than any other country. The process is still under way: regional languages have trouble obtaining recognition and anyone not displaying the proper accent will be laughed at. La Francophonie goes exactly the opposite way by glorifying differences within the same language. It is odd to hear French ministers praising Boutros-Ghali's effort to promote multilingualism knowing that the French are the least bilingual Europeans — with the possible exception of the Greeks. In effect, they fail to understand that French has survived outside of France precisely because most other societies cultivate differences, not because France was particularly good at broadcasting.

Arguably, the French are not obsessed with Francophonie because they are the only Francophones



*Pietro Sicuro, a Quebecker, heads the Internet program of the Agency for Francophonie. This multimillion dollar project, aimed at Africa, is one of the Agency's most successful. It was originally run by Quebeckers only, but Africans and French are moving into management.*

whose culture is not threatened. This is changing with Europe. Says Senator Jacques Legendre, head of the *Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie*, "The main stake is Europe. If the English language becomes the language of the European government, Europe will become an extension of America and the French will be completely marginalized."

By their insularity, the French deny themselves what the British have had: the world. You do not find within Francophonie the free movement of people, language and artistic production that you find between countries like the US, Canada, UK and Australia, not to mention India. Francophone artistic productions are welcome in France if they are exotic and quaint, or absolutely French. France remains colonial and denies the fundamental message of La Francophonie: There are other ways. Francophones are welcome in France when they are discovered in New York. During the Canadian Embassy's round table on Francophonie, Quebec film-maker François Girard explained that his films, *32 Short Films About Glenn Gould* and *The Red Violin*, were a hit in France because they had been successes in New York and Tokyo. Forget Montreal,

<sup>8</sup> The *Académie française*, which will be the object of a future report, might be a cause for this, but it really is a consequence, in my opinion.

Dakar, Moncton or Brussels. Where did you say? Singer Céline Dion is another case in point: the French “discovered her” in 1994 because she was a success in the US and because she asked French composer Jean-Jacques Goldmann to write her songs.

Two-way cultural communication is just beginning within Francophonie — cutting-edge artistic production in France comes from African and Arab immigrants, or their offspring. But by the time the French realize the fantastic potential they are letting go it might be too late. New Brunswick, a member of La Francophonie, is one of the very few places in the world where the Common Law has been developed in French! Meanwhile, the French media complain that “Anglo-Saxon” lawyers are picking up their best layers.

By the same token: there is such a thing as a *Bureau*

*Français du Livre* (French Book Bureau) in New York. It represents French publishers on the American market. In an article published by French foreign affairs, the director of the bureau was blaming Americans for caring less about European literature, namely French, and more about Latin American, African or Middle East literature. Strangely, there is such a thing as Francophone literature from those areas, but it is very likely that his mandate doesn’t allow him to promote this, if he knows at all about its existence.

It’s precisely this lack of vision, of generosity and of curiosity — this superiority — that explains why the French language has lost stature internationally and why La Francophonie as an institution is not yet flying as high as it could. Sadly, France, the giant of La Francophonie, has never engendered anything bigger than itself. It is comforting to be a giant among dwarves. □

*accompanying text #1*

## **BRITISH COMMONWEALTH, MEET LA FRANCOFONIE**

Created in 1931, the British Commonwealth began as a pledge of allegiance to the British Crown by former colonies. Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand wanted to maintain family links and economic ties. But The Commonwealth came to adopt a more confused agenda as more states joined in during the de-colonization process, starting with India in 1947.

Nowadays The Commonwealth, like La Francophonie, is an umbrella organization coordinating a galaxy of programs and entities. Both run on similar budgets for the same number of countries. Both have a strong North-South bias. Both welcome countries that barely have a linguistic link with either Great Britain or France. In addition, the next Commonwealth Summit, in November, deal with globalization and cultural identity, a pet topic of La Francophonie.

Important differences remain. The Commonwealth, which doesn’t even have a charter, is less formal in its proceedings and doesn’t have a clear center. It remains more economic in its orientation and more capable of developing a clear position on international issues. It was The Commonwealth that attracted attention on apartheid by banning South Africa as early as 1961. More recently, it banned Nigeria after General Abacha’s military coup. Another difference: The Commonwealth, which is reserved to former colonies, has no particular hangup on language. In true British fashion, the use of English as a medium of communication is viewed as self-evident.

## SURF ON THE USA

Why has France remained so influential internationally, given that French ranks only 11<sup>th</sup> among world languages in number of speakers?

The French may not like the answer, but they are the dwarf on the shoulder of the giant. By a rare process of cultural symbiosis, English and French are very closely linked. French, I found, has surfed on the English wave like no other language. The surfboard is called inertia, semantics and psychology, but as we will see everything holds so well together that the parts are difficult to isolate.

***Inertia.*** France was the intellectual and political powerhouse of Europe between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with a tremendous scientific and cultural output. In the area called the Northern Atlantic, an interesting love-triangle existed. Britain, the world power, fully accepted its 18<sup>th</sup>-century divorce from the US, the rising power, while the French wedged themselves between as the friend and ally of the Americans against the Brits — a pretty good position. Since World War II, the Brits have clearly sided with the Americans and the French have retrenched into a more defiant position. Yet France maintained a disproportionate influence in part because of General Charles de Gaulle's policy of political and economic grandeur.

***Semantics.*** The English language has a rare feature: perfect synonyms: tolerate-put up with, fragile-frail. But they are not that perfect when you get the subtext to the English dictionary: bright people use the French word. I realized it during my undergraduate studies at McGill University. My English was not brilliant, but I just had to anglicize some French terms to be respected as a speaker. People complimented me on my English, yet I couldn't make myself understood by a railroader. George Orwell's 10 rules for writing proper English are all about using words from German roots. Yet, French terms fly higher in a salon. English Academese, Legalese and Diplomatese are heavily influenced by French. So the educated "tolerate" the usage, and the plebes "put up with" it.

***Psychology.*** The French have imposed their taste durably. Even to this day, you're well traveled only if you've been to Paris. It certainly helped that the French were themselves a society with a well-identified élite, with a tremendous output of luxury goods and artistic products that appealed to élites worldwide. This occurred in conjunction to France's colonial policy of teaching French not to the many but to the right people. By a stroke of historical luck, they strongly appealed to the taste of the British and American élites. Like it or not, it pays to be political.

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4273**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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