



Time cannot erase history nor silence injustice

OPINION

« There is more texture to the language issue in Quebec than what is propagated by most media outlets...»



This issue is considered to have started in the late 1960s and it is routinely contended that the French language became precarious, particularly in Montreal, in large part because Italian immigrants refused to send their children to French schools. The St. L onard school riots of 1968 were driven by this belief. This unrest led to the creation of the Gendron commission in 1968, the royal inquiry into the situation of the French language in Quebec, that generated a 1,423-page report. Language legislation was adopted by the governments of the Union Nationale in 1969 (Bill 63), the Liberals in 1974 (Bill 22), and finally the PQ in 1977 (Bill 101).

The tactic of blaming immigrants for language issues in Quebec, that continues to this day, originated with the Italian immigrant community. This Italian immigrant blaming narrative intentionally omits to contextualize why Italian-origin children attended English schools during the post-World War Two immigration wave. Specifically, how Italians were treated by Quebec's French Catholic education system of that time is absent from this divisive narrative. From the time of the Conquest until Confederation, education was provided, in what is now Quebec, by "denominational schools": French-language Catholic schools, English language Catholic schools and English language Protestant schools. The British North America Act created Quebec in 1867.

Section 93 of the Act entrusted exclusive jurisdiction over education to the province and constitutionally protected Quebec's Catholic and Protestant schools. Parents sent their children to Catholic or Protestant schools. The societal importance of religion and its impact on schooling during this era cannot be overstated. The basis of school enrolment in Quebec was religious faith.

This was the education system in place in Quebec during the massive post WW II immigration wave. Italians comprised a significant proportion of that wave. They were overwhelmingly Catholic and ostensibly entitled to attend French Catholic schools.

The inconvenient truth that is not discussed in Quebec's history curriculum nor reported by the media is that Italian parents, including this author's parents, tried to enrol their children in French Catholic schools but were rejected by those schools and were directed to English Catholic schools.

An inference of discrimination explaining the systemic denial of enrolment of Italian-origin students in French Catholic schools is difficult to avoid. These students may have been Catholic, but they were considered different.



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Their names were unusual and considered hard to pronounce. French Catholic schools served a homogeneous student body with names whose roots traced back to New France.

French Catholic educators were comfortable preserving this status quo, continuing to educate descendants of the original French-speaking settler society that had, at the time, the highest birth rate of the western world.

French speaking Quebec did not need demographic reinforcement from Italian-origin students.

How can anyone be surprised that in the 1970s, Italians continued to send their children to English schools where they felt accepted?

Italian immigrants went from being told that their children were unwanted by the French Catholic education system in the 1950s and '60s, to being blamed, in the 1970s, for compromising the French language by not enrolling their children in French Catholic schools, an accusation that coincided with a drastically falling francophone birth rate attributable to waning Catholic Church influence and the sexual revolution.

The predominantly trilingual Italian community adeptly blended into Quebec society and contributed to its prosperity.

The less than welcoming treatment experienced with Quebec's French Catholic education system was overcome but not forgotten.

The Quebec government owes an apology to the Quebec Italian community for the systemic practice of the post-World War II era Quebec education system of denying Italian-origin students the right to attend French language Catholic schools.

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