

CONFIDENTIAL

February 3, 1975.

MEMORANDUM TO MR. ROBERTSON:

Article by Dominique Clift in Montreal Star,  
January 16, 1975, on Mr. Bourassa

Pierre O'Neil brought to the Prime Minister's attention at staff meeting on Friday the attached article by Dominique Clift. As you may know, Pierre is of the view that Premier Bourassa feels deeply challenged by the federal government's plans with respect to constitutional amendment. You might find it useful to have a word with Pierre. He has discussed all this with Dominique Clift, whom he knows well.

  
P.M.P.

Pauline  
AS

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*Independence theme*

By DOMINIQUE CLIFT

# Bourassa's borrowed clothes

**G**REAT and divisive issues sometimes have a way of petering out without any of their underlying reasons being effectively resolved. Political perceptions are subject to change and after a while people are surprised at the intensity of their former feelings. This is what happened, for example, to the great anti-Communist crusades of the 1950s with their climate of hostility and suspicion. Today it is hard to imagine what was so frightening about the Communist party of 20 years ago.

Could the same thing be happening to the idea of Quebec independence? Its political edges are certainly not as sharp as they used to be, and it does not generate the same degree of anxiety as it seemed to do a few years ago. Very often politicians will actively and consciously contribute to changes in public attitudes, leaving everyone to wonder about their motives and intentions.

There is no doubt that Premier Bourassa has been doing just that on the issue of independence. Cultural sovereignty and language are themes to which he has been giving increasing importance for a year or two. The shift has been almost imperceptible. But recently he has taken a bolder and more obvious step forward, even if it is only in the realm of words.

**A novel view**

"A French state within the Canadian Common Market" is the title of an article which recently appeared under the premier's own name in a Paris publication, *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

It is indeed a way of looking at Quebec's present status in Confederation. The article itself is fairly innocuous and does not measure up to the expectations raised by the title. There is an insistence on using words like country and nation for Quebec. However, the premier writes that its citi-

zens are very eager "to maintain their full participation in the Canadian experience."

Premier Bourassa has never been above using semantic tricks to confuse or defuse an issue. And a perfectly normal reaction might be to wonder whether such a fanciful description of Canadian federalism matters at all as long as words remain powerless to alter anything that is important.

Nevertheless, the real question has to do with the premier's reasons for using a phrase which is an essential aspect of the Parti Québécois program and to which separatists attribute a different meaning altogether. The premier has already stolen "social democracy" and other slogans from his political opponents. Some of them he had to explain to worried bankers during his recent European trip. But now, as an incurable shop-lifter, he seems to be getting bolder all the time, indifferent to the consequences or to the ridicule

The idea of a politically independent Quebec associated with the rest of Canada in a monetary and customs union was first developed by René Lévesque in 1963 after he had bolted the Liberal party. It was pre-

sented by the Mouvement Souveraineté-Association as a safe brand of separatism, one that would do away with the possible dangers of an economic collapse.

As they say, truth is stranger than fiction. One of the people who helped Lévesque work out this political and economic program was Robert Bourassa himself. At that time he was financial critic for the Liberal opposition in the national assembly and had still-to-be-fulfilled leadership ambitions. But he was not averse to exploring unorthodox ideas and his basement at home was available for Lévesque and his friends. So was his expertise in fiscal and financial mat-

ters. This sort of situation may help explain the somewhat confusing nature of Quebec politics. At any rate, as Bourassa began his conquest of the Liberal party in 1969 he turned his back on the political program

which he had certainly helped put together with Lévesque.

Several years later, after two overwhelming victories at the polls, Premier Bourassa has this irresistible compulsion to appropriate certain aspects of the Parti Québécois program. What he takes has to do more with words than with substance, but it nevertheless shows an uncommon and bizarre preoccupation with the program of a party which is, after all, the Opposition.

**Motives obscure**

The premier's motives are certainly obscure. At first sight there would seem to be little political advantage to be gained by blurring or even downgrading the issue of Quebec independence. All it does is to reassure people about the Parti Québécois and break down whatever inhibitions they might have had about supporting René Lévesque. Because of the low public esteem in which it is held, the Liberal party can hardly afford this.

On the other hand it is difficult to imagine that Premier Bourassa could believe shifts in public opinion might be forestalled by draping himself in borrowed clothes. He is merely giving greater credibility to the central proposal in the opposition's political program.

The most plausible explanation —



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apart from mere flippancy and fun-making—might well be that Premier Bourassa is eager to realign his sights because he doubts the ability of the present federal system to survive the economic and social tensions that are currently taking shape and do not originate exclusively from Quebec. In that case, Lévesque's ideas would assume much greater importance than they had before, in view of the possibility of a new constitutional order that would separate political and cultural decisions from purely economic ones.

But whatever Premier Bourassa's concept of the future or his reasons for playing with words, his renewed preoccupation with separatist slogans and ideas might be indicative of changes in Quebec's political scene. But the premier may be a long time in formulating clearly what was in the back of his mind.