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# 'I will fight separatism to the end of my career'

## Robert Bourassa:

# Canada's new Mackenzie

# King

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### QUEBEC CITY

To visit Quebec is to wonder what ever happened to it all.

The verve, the passion, the arrogant bravado that inspired the nationalist songs of Pauline Julien, that made "for sale" signs blossom on the lawns of Westmount after every speech by separatist leader Rene Levesque, that sent battalions of Quebec technocrats in well-cut suits to out-argue the Ottawa mandarins with Jesuit skill—all these are gone.

Instead one finds self-doubt—the corrosive malaise of a society that no longer knows what it really wants or even what it is. Communications Minister Gerard Pelletier has anguished over a "crisis of leadership" at every level, from classroom to church. Robert Cliche, head of the inquiry into the chaos of the construction industry, speaks of "an illness" in the society. La Presse, Quebec's largest newspaper, warns in an unprecedented front-page editorial, "the vacuum is getting deeper and deeper."

Premier Robert Bourassa has presided over this change. Five years ago he came to power, and today he celebrates his anniversary.

Bourassa looks at what has happened in the last five years and he sees it as good.

Theory is for the intellectuals in their drawing rooms," Bourassa said during an exclusive interview with The Star. "Look at the results. The year I came to power, Ottawa

had to send troops into the streets of Montreal. This year Ottawa is sending us \$1 billion in oil subsidies. That's what Quebec wants."

### No heat

The answer measures the man. No heat, no hurried attempt to defend difficult terrain—he says Pelletier's analysis is "too pessimistic," and as for the scandals, "not one has been proven against a minister or member." Instead, a balance-sheet, cool, rational and calculated so the account comes out in his favor.

To any interview with a public figure, one arrives freighted with set impressions. In Bourassa's case these are the memories of his panic during the terrible 1970 FLQ crisis, of B.C. Premier David Barrett's description of him as "a white mouse," and of the nickname "Boo

Boo" that Ottawa insiders call him behind closed doors.

At first glance, these images apply. Bourassa has a certain charm but no magnetism or air of authority. "Boyish," in his case, means that he is easy for cartoonists to caricature as Ottawa's puppet.

"An underfed bank clerk," someone has called him. No clerk could afford Bourassa's superbly tailored dark-blue suit, but he spoils its effect with a beige wool sweater.

The interview takes place in a small, private room above a restaurant so that Bourassa can eat and talk at the same time. (Bourassa works 12 and 14 hours a day.) On

the stairs outside stand two bodyguards, hard, thickset men who smile with difficulty. Presumably they are there partly to inspire awe: Instead they make Bourassa seem more vulnerable.

### Youngest premier

As Bourassa talks, on and on until nearly midnight, the preconceptions recede. One remembers instead that he won power at 36, the youngest premier in Quebec's history; that his majority is larger even than Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed's; that by the next election he will have held power longer than any premier since Maurice Duplessis. Slowly one begins to comprehend how he has done it.

Across the table, never entirely relaxed, coming back again and again to his main points, skillfully dropping the odd bit of inside information that always delights a reporter, sits Mackenzie King, reborn.

Jack Pickersgill, for years the gray eminence of Canada's least-loved, least-understood, and most successful politician, has said that Bourassa is more like King than any politician he has known.

Pickersgill has hit the mark. Bourassa likes the comparison, and adds to it. "Yes, I have studied him,

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carefully," he says. "King was often accused of not being firm, but he knew how to be firm when he had to be. So do I. Remember I jailed the union leaders. But I did it without demagoguery."

As in the case of King, Bourassa's opponents, particularly the separatists with their quick, self-righteous passion, make the fatal mistake of underestimating him.

"Charisma," he says disdainfully, with the quick smile he uses when he knows he is going to score a point.

"Clement Atlee had no charisma, and look what happened to Winston Churchill. Levesque has charisma, and look what has happened to him."

Once the connection is made, resemblances between the two are easy to find. King, his crystal ball hidden, made himself as colorless as he could manage. So does Bourassa. About the only anecdotes to be told about him concern his personal hairdresser: the steaks he consumes to try, without success, to gain weight; his 20 daily lengths in the pool, "for intellectual and physical discipline."

Only one magazine has attempted a full-length profile of him. That was *Chatelaine*, a woman's magazine, and it really was more interested in Andree Bourassa.

The vital link is that, like King during the conscription crisis of World War II, Bourassa governs a society that is deeply polarized. Out of choice, but also out of necessity, he disguises his purposes and goals, at times perhaps even from himself.

As one example, Bourassa praises U.S. capital and loves to tell of a weekend spent with the Rockefellers. Yet he also calls himself "a social democrat" and quotes British economist John Maynard Keynes' dictum that inflation, well handled, can be used to redistribute income. Indeed, he has introduced denticare (tooth care), legal aid, and in the recent budget cut 300,000 from the tax rolls.

## Race relations

Race relations require Bourassa

to apply his fluid formula beyond the boundaries of his own province.

"I am always surprised that English Canada should jump at some of the words I use. (His comment, "A French state in a Canadian common market," comes to mind.) Why do they not understand? I am working at the same time for Quebec and for Canada. This is not always easy."

Bill 22, the controversial language legislation, is a case in point. Protests by English-Canadians, it becomes clear though Bourassa will not say so, have served their purpose by strengthening his reputation among Quebec nationalists.

His judgment of separatism is rational, and cold.

"It would be a tragic, stupid mistake. I will fight separatism to the end of my career. We would lose 200,000 people, more. Today we have to go on our knees to Wall Street because we need the money. Separate, we would be flat on our face to Wall Street."

Rather than to Canadianism, the natural opposite to separatism, Bourassa's commitment is to federalism a kind of half way house.

He remembers his time in Ottawa as a civil servant as "very enjoyable," and, surprisingly, he says that one Ottawa position that might one day interest him would be minister of finance. "I have always been deeply interested in public administration."

## Federal system

Bourassa says, "I believe deeply in the federal system, in the 11 leaders making this country work. Quebec today has sufficient economic strength. James Bay will give us jobs in the '70s, and energy in the '80s. It is our culture that is in danger. Today with Pierre (Trudeau) at Ottawa we are in no danger. But tomorrow, with our population declining and perhaps with another government and only a half-dozen Quebec ministers, how then could we allow our cultural survival to depend on the good-will of the majority? This is the guarantee I must get

for my people."

A constitutional confrontation, at a conference probably to be held in mid-'76, seems to be in the making. Trudeau has said he intends to bring Canada's constitution back from Britain but that he will not agree to any transfer of power to the provinces. Bourassa in turn has declared he will not agree to repatriation except as part of a package deal that gives Quebec expanded jurisdiction over immigration and culture.

Without being specific—"Why should I show my bargaining hand?"—Bourassa hints that a solution can be found. Instead of a transfer of actual jurisdiction he might accept explicit constitutional guarantees for Quebec's culture and future population composition.

Bourassa's style of negotiation has been shaped by his experiences. "the toughest of my life," at the 1971 Victoria constitutional conference. He agreed to a new constitution, then at the last minute changed his mind and refused to sign. "I felt almost physically the pressures



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of being a federalist Quebecker," he recalls.

Bourassa appreciates that these days Trudeau has to be more concerned about the West than about Quebec. He knows that he also has to condition public opinion before he commits himself. So he moves forward, an inch at a time.

"Relations, practical working relations, between Ottawa and Quebec have never been better."

None of these administrative deals is glamorous. When he feels the need to strike a pose, he asks for patience.

"English-Canadians must understand that I cannot do things differently. My margin for manoeuvre is very small. I am working to consolidate a besieged society."

Bourassa's vision for the future of that society will leave his critics as dissatisfied as before. He foresees, "an equilibrium, economic strength and an assurance of cultural survival."

That vision is practical: It is neither moral nor philosophic. But to demand more, bold oratory, brave promises, from a Bourassa as much as from a Mackenzie King, is to ask, not as much for the impossible as for the non-existent.

## More durable

"Nietzsche or was it Goethe said

that every epoch must have its own servant. The '60s were the time of bombs and slogans and for Latin, emotional leaders. Is it wrong that in the '70s Quebec should be led by someone who believes in rational, cool, politics?"

A good self-description of a politician who has taken the measure of his own inability to generate warmth and excitement, and who has learned to turn that lack to his advantage.

Quebec will have to solve its own malaise. Bourassa will provide the 75,000 jobs a year, the five budgets without tax increases in a row, the federal money.

He will be doing that, one comes away convinced, for a long time. The boyish facade hides a politician far more shrewd, far more calculating and resilient, and above all far more durable, than most observers and all of his opponents yet have recognized. Quebec, one remembers at the end, gave Mackenzie King each one of his victories.