

**QUEBEC VOTES** / Politics in Quebec is part substance, part theatre and always passionate. Two former Edmontonians now living in Montreal offer their impressions on the Quebec election

# Through Alberta eyes

CYRUS LEWIS AND  
LAURENCE MIALL  
*Special to The Journal*  
MONTREAL

It's election time in Quebec (Dec. 8), and the differences between La Belle Province and Wild Rose Country could not be more pronounced. Oil, infrastructure, education, the environment — those are the issues we were used to in Alberta. In Quebec, it's language, culture, language — issues that often crowd out all else



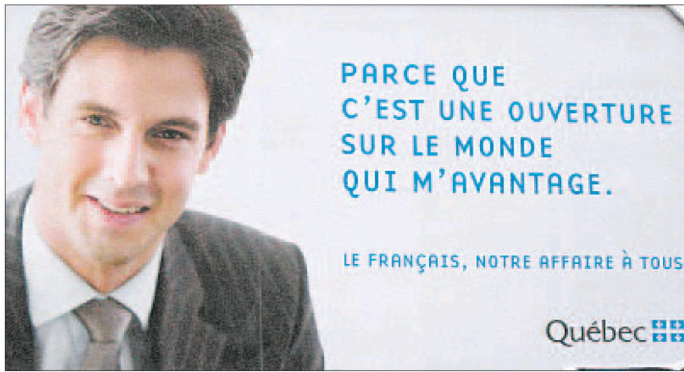
Poster on Rue St. Denis, Montreal. Translation: "Quebec, a New Country for the World." *The Conseil de la Souveraineté du Québec* sells these posters from its website for \$10 each. In Montreal, they adorn the balconies of the traditional walk-up apartment buildings.

► **Cyrus:** You can get an even better deal from the Separation Party of Alberta — they offer bumper stickers for only \$3. Nevertheless, sovereigntist paraphernalia is obviously vastly more popular in Quebec than Alberta. Sovereignty is a part of the political platform of every major Quebec party other than the Liberals.

► **Laurence:** And even the Liberals are stealing

moves from the sovereigntists' playbook. Their election posters say, in big bold letters, "OUI," as in, "The Economy First — OUI." Leader Jean Charest admits he "reclaimed" the OUI from the sovereigntists' campaign of the 1995 referendum.

► **Cyrus:** The lucky person who owns the patent on the word YES is probably living it up in the Cayman Islands.



Government billboards promoting the French language. Translation: "Because it opens up the world to me. The French language, it's everyone's business." Launched in October by the ruling Liberal government, the goal of the campaign, according to Quebec's culture minister, Christine St-Pierre, is to remind Quebecers that promoting French is the responsibility of everyone.

► **Laurence:** Why are the billboards only in French? That seems like preaching to the choir. Promoting French is vital, but sometimes the intolerance toward those who don't speak French — or don't speak it well enough — is excessive. My former roommate, who is Chinese, went out shopping in our neighbourhood one night, and several teenagers started mocking him. He was unable to respond to their satisfaction in French, so they beat him up.

► **Cyrus:** Sadly, tensions over the language issue are not uncommon in Quebec. What's remarkable is that despite the Quebec government's best efforts, French in Canada is, in fact, declining. 2006 saw the francophone population of Quebec slip below 80 per cent for the first time since 1931. Also in 2006, the use of French in Canada dropped by 0.8 per cent.

Quebec's French heritage makes for a more robust and colourful Canada and it should be actively protected. In the same way that the Faculté St Jean makes the University of Alberta and Edmonton a more interesting and robust place, so too does the combination of English and French culture in Canada.

There is something special about overhearing couples and groups of friends communicating in both languages — effortlessly switching from one to the other — in the cafes, bistros, markets and streets of Montreal.

Political sign on Blvd. St. Laurent — Québec solidaire: calling for an end to dependence on oil. Translation: "For a wind-powered Quebec: Québec solidaire. Against oil dependency." Active in Quebec politics since 2005, Québec Solidaire won 3.6 per cent of the popular vote in the 2007 Quebec election, roughly equivalent to the support for the Green Party this year in Alberta. Québec solidaire is standing for reduced oil dependence, fighting poverty, opposing all forms of privatization, and eliminating junk food from hospitals.

► **Laurence:** I'll eat a cowboy hat the day I see an Alberta party coming out against oil. You don't bite the hand that feeds you!

Obviously, Quebec is not an oil producer, but that's not the only big difference. In Edmonton, 77 per cent of the population are dependent on a car for all of their travel; in Calgary, it's 75 per cent. Here in Montreal, only 65 per cent are similarly car-dependent. That's partly thanks to the Metro and buses, but it's also because Montreal has successfully made driving a car an absolute nightmare! Byzantine parking rules, relentless ticketing, dilapidated highways, and traffic jams as long as the Great Wall of China. In an environment such as this, no wonder Québec solidaire argues for abandoning the fossil fuel economy ASAP.

► **Cyrus:** You should buy a bus pass.



A defaced sign in the provincial riding of Hochelaga-Maisonnette. Graffiti on a Liberal campaign poster reads: "F--- you." While vandalizing an Albertan election campaign poster with the phrase "F--- you" is understood to be an offence, this is not always the case in Montreal. Judge Pierre G. Bouchard, in a recent court case on the use of the f-word against a police officer, determined that "Although generally considered wrong, impolite and coarse, the words 'f--- you' do not at all constitute a blasphemy, since a blasphemy by definition invokes God or sacred things." This definition of blasphemy is, of course, the French definition.

► **Laurence:** Hmm. Maybe it's no longer a crime for me to use some of the spicier words of the English language to tell a police officer where to go, but I'm not about to try it.

► **Cyrus:** While I wouldn't want to try it either, I suspect that I might get away with exclaiming "Tabarnac!" in the presence of an Edmonton police officer.



PHOTOS:  
CYRUS LEWIS  
AND  
LAURENCE MIALL

Parti Quebec campaign poster on Rue St. Denis. Parti Québécois leader launches her campaign by asking the federal government for money. Translation: "Quebec's a winner with Pauline." Pauline Marois, PQ leader since June 2007, outlined an economic crisis plan costing \$500 million to \$600 million. To help pay for it, the PQ would call on Ottawa to pay Quebec for damages from the 1998 ice storm.

► **Cyrus:** Well, as my Scottish grandmother used to say, it's never too late to call in a debt.

► **Laurence:** I can't imagine any political party in Alberta making a ten year-old debt repayment a cornerstone of its campaign.

But, of course, the finances of these two provinces couldn't be any more different. I did some sleuthing around on Statistics Canada's website and discovered that Quebec's accumulated deficit is \$5.8 billion. Ouch!

► **Cyrus:** Meanwhile, Alberta is enjoying a \$2-billion surplus. Vive la difference!

Cyrus Lewis moved to Montreal from Edmonton in 2005. He is freelance writing and working on his MA in Media Studies at Concordia University. Laurence Miall moved to Montreal from Edmonton in 2007. He has started a graduate diploma in communications at Concordia University, and works as a freelance writer and communications consultant.