

C-FAR NEWSLETTER

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Apres Moi Le Deluge

Bill 101 was adopted in 1977 by the **Parti Quebecois** government to safeguard the future of French in the province. That this paranoid instrument has given us all so many laughs is not the point, the point, apparently, is that Quebec is constitutionally predisposed to retrofight the battle of the **Plains of Abraham** and obsess over the *Maudit Anglais*, irrespective of what the Maghreb, Haiti, Vietnam, or Cote d'Ivoire have been doing for the last 200 years. The far from startling news that the **Supreme Court** upheld Quebec's constitutional "right" to bar the children of francophone parents from the taint of English language instruction dovetailed nicely with news that Arabic is poised to supplant English as the second most common mother tongue in Quebec's French-language school system: "This year, 18,649 students in the French school system speak English as their mother tongue [17,313 in 1999 -- a modest increase of about 8% over five years] By contrast, Arabic as a mother tongue ... is now spoken by 18,084 students [just 12,731 in 1999, Arabic enrolment has grown more than five times as fast -- 42%]." (**National Post**, March 31, 2005)

The Grudge Fund

The recent budget laid out a fortune for orchestrated grovelling over Canada's allegedly racist past. And after all, who *wouldn't* prefer politically engineered penance to, say, clean hospitals? The logic behind the atonement fund goes something like this: Anyone sharing the skin colour of people long-dead is liable for anything people sharing their skin colour might have done 'to injure the feelings of people with any other skin colour at any time in history. It is perfectly acceptable to victimize an entire group of people because of their skin colour today, because today, skin colour doesn't matter. Got it? Lucky you. Even so, "a group representing Chinese-Canadians has denounced the federal budget's \$25-million outlay ... 'It's inadequate. It doesn't address the needs of the families affected by the head tax and the exclusion act,' said **Victor Wong**, executive-director of the **Chinese Canadian National Council**." (**National Post**, February 25, 2005) The last time we looked, the headtax lobby was demanding, not some paltry \$25-million worth of atmospheric keening, but **\$1.2-BILLION**. Which is to say, a pretty strong incentive to see everything through a prism of Chinese suffering with Whites cast as extras from **Deliverance**.

Like most anti-racist initiatives, this is the stuff to galvanize the simplistic mind. Real life, subtler and infinitely more complex, is not lived in terms of absolutist stereotypes. For instance, the Chinese did *not* "come here to build our railroad for us." The term **Gold Mountain** was literal. Chinese settlement can be readily plotted against major gold strikes around the **Pacific Rim**: When gold was discovered in 1848, at **Sutter's Mill**, there were fifty-four Chinese in California; four years later, 20,000 would enter through the port of San Francisco alone. By 1876, California's Chinese population was 116,000. In 1851, a failed Forty-Niner returned home to Australia and hit paydirt in New South Wales: Four years later, 11,000 Chinese are recorded as having entered Victoria on "sail now, pay later" credit tickets. Many of these would move on to try their luck at the 1866 strike in Otago, New Zealand. Thus, the first Chinese appeared in Canada -- by way of California's played-out gold fields -- in 1858, the year gold was discovered on the Fraser. As usual, the Chinese population would explode in short order: from none in 1857, Chinese

accounted for about one-third of Victoria's population in 1881. Apart from the Chinese component, British Columbia's already small population was actually shrinking: "Although Canada's population as a whole was still growing through natural increase, the population of B.C. suffered serious declines between the 1850s and 1870s. Even the under-enumerated population figures of the early census show that B.C.'s population decreased from 51,524 in 1861 to 36,247 in 1871 before rising to 49,459 in 1881." (**Peter S. Li**, **Chinese in Canada**, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 28) Li notes that fully 15,701 Chinese arrived between 1881 and 1884 alone (a figure representing 31% of BC's 1881 population; historian **Jack Granatstein** says the number was probably more like 17,007 -- 34%). "Of the eight thousand who arrived in Victoria during 1882, 6,500 disembarked in the three months of April, May, and June." (**From China to Canada**, **Wickberg**, McClelland and Stewart, 1988, p. 21) Thus, when railway jobs dried up in 1885, the depressed territory was awash with thousands of unemployed Chinese navvies, with thousands more continuing to flood in. Given British Columbia's starvation economy and China's even then staggering overpopulation, unrestricted Chinese immigration must have looked like a famine in the making, in a year when the effect of a worldwide depression was just beginning to make itself felt: "On 21 November 1885 the **Executive Council of British Columbia** sent a report to the **Secretary of State** in Ottawa describing the hardship endured by many Chinese who had been discharged by the railroad company on completion of the **CPR**. The report suggests that the Chinese coolies were working under an indenture system of sorts: '*Thousands of these people, having been summarily discharged by the railway contractors, and their earnings having been absorbed by their rapacious masters or owners, are now left in a starving condition, and unless substantial relief be extended to them there is every prospect of their perishing during the winter.*'" (**Public Archives of Canada**, 1886) ... The difficult economic conditions continued for at least two decades after the completion of the railway, becoming so desperate that between 1890 and 1914 the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Victoria made three attempts to discourage further immigration from China." (**Chinese in Canada**, p. 22) So, let's get this straight: When the **Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association** makes repeated attempts to discourage Chinese migration, it is being, well, benevolent -- let the government of a sovereign state try it and it's racism. Note also that the government of the day was trying to *feed them*, not behead them (as was then happening to Europeans in China). A couple of other points should be noted: one is that the rapacious masters in question were Chinese, often power brokers in these same benevolent organizations, or high-binder societies. Secondly, by imperial edict, emigration from China was technically a capital offence until 1893: "Those who find excuse to sojourn abroad and then clandestinely return home, if captured, shall be executed immediately."

At the same time, a whole catalogue of behaviours would have horrified Canadians of the day: Not so very far removed from indentured servitude themselves, Canadians would hardly have welcomed an infusion of indentured semi-slave (often scab) labour into the New World sphere (and certainly not when the US was actually flirting with the idea of importing coolies to replace manumitted blacks). And it wasn't just the feudalism (the ubiquitous queue or pigtail proclaiming the wearer's serf-like status) that was abhorrent, there was kow-towing, concubinage, infanticide, foot

binding, the creation of eunuchs, and opium -- previously unknown to Canada. With a ready market, there were factories in Vancouver and "the rapid increase in the number of opium factories in Victoria [went] from one to twelve during 1881-84" (From China to Canada, p. 68) There was widespread smuggling of both opium and coolies into the US (out of gold long before Canada, the US outlawed coolie contracts in 1875 and restricted entries in 1882). BC would also establish a leper colony and orphanages to house the children of Chinese prostitutes (a dissonant note when so much has been made of "the sad, bachelor society" Canada allegedly created). "In 1885, the **Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration** provided statistics showing that British Columbia had 154 Chinese women, of whom 70 [nearly half] were prostitutes, among 10,550 Chinese." (Li, p. 74) But at that point there was no legal instrument restricting entry -- head tax lobbyists might at least explain why so few bothered to bring wives. Worst of all would have been the macabre practice of exhuming the dead and washing their bones for shipment back to China and their ancestors -- something the contractors guaranteed at the outset of a coolie contract. Was it the people Canadians found objectionable, or what they did? By that measure, it must be stressed that while the Chinese themselves have dispensed with virtually each one of these fractious cultural practices, Canadians are now on the hook for not much liking such customs more than a hundred years ago. But there's no margin in hairsplitting in a shakedown: When an 1886 fire destroyed most of Vancouver, 100 Chinese residents were given a ten-year rent-free lease on sixty hectares of land near Main Street on the north shore of False Creek. Hey, whatever. It should also be noted that the head tax was instituted at the precise moment BC could see an (imported) famine looming. And Canada never extracted any form of payment from educated Chinese (doctors, students, clergy, merchants, visitors) -- in other words, those least likely to become public charges.

The instrument that, again, with exceptions, barred most Chinese from entering the country, the **Chinese Immigration Act**, came into effect on July 1, 1923, and much traction has been gained from "**Canada Day** being Humiliation Day" within the Chinese community. This was enacted at a time when Canada was desperately trying to cope with 60,000 men suffering from a malady no one even understood -- shell shock. At the same time, the country was attempting to re-integrate and employ 500,000 able-bodied veterans of the **Great War**, against a backdrop of steep unemployment and a post-war recession that would swell into the **Great Depression**. At war's conclusion in 1919 -- four years *before* the Chinese were excluded -- all former enemies -- Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Romanians, Poles, and Ukrainians -- were barred from entering Canada, and, for good measure, the prohibition was extended to Mennonites, Hutterites, and Doukhobors as unassimilables. Immigrants were required to possess \$250 in landing money, and, by 1921, *everyone* needed a visa to enter Canada -- a visa that had to be obtained overseas. Since it does not advance the paying proposition that Canada was a hotbed of White supremacy, anti-European restrictions have been forgotten.

Fast forward to 1948, when a group seeking repeal of the **Chinese Immigration Act** appeared before the **Standing Committee of the Senate on Immigration and Labour**. "They asked the Committee to recommend that **Order-in-Council P.C. 2115** be repealed, and that married men of Chinese descent resident in Canada be allowed to bring their wives and children into Canada to live with them. The Committee did so. But the deputation was anxious to point out that this was all they were asking the Committee to do -- nothing more. 'We are not asking you,' they said, 'to open wide the gates for Chinese immigration. We are only asking you to allow the wives and children

of Chinese residents of Canada to come here.'" (Canada and Immigration, Hawkins, 1988, McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 85) Ironically, it was at this point that illicit entries really took off. A little over ten years later, illegal Chinese immigration was so utterly out of control the government initiated what was, in all but name, a general amnesty. The 1960 **Chinese Adjustment Statement Programme** urged Chinese to come forward and disclose the true composition of their family* as well as the means by which they had entered Canada. And, if they were otherwise productive and law abiding, they would not be deported; the punitive angle was never really explored, although the amnesty remained in force for decades. (*The preferred method for circumventing Canadian law was through the creation of *slots*: At the initial interview with an immigration officer, the candidate would lie about the size of his family -- the *slots* thus created would later be sold to complete strangers who would purchase entry to Canada under the guise of the fictitious relative. This is another reason to be wary of the current dodge that family composition elsewhere is unlike family composition here -- as whole new chains are set in motion). Four years after granting the amnesty, the immigration minister of the day, **René Tremblay**, "visited Hong Kong and held discussions with the British ... Americans, Australians and **United Nations** officials. [An extract of the final report says] 'All immigration services in Hong Kong ... described exactly the same problems as ours: extensive fraud, complete disregard for the truth or legal oaths, ready use of forgery, bribery or any other devices to gain the ends desired. All agreed that almost every migrant is lying about something, either because he or she is an imposter, is covering for someone else or is trying to create new slots for future use.'" (Canada and Immigration, pp 133-4) Let's leave it there. For the moment, it certainly sounds as if somebody owes someone an apology.

Canada's First And Costliest Inequity

"**Air Canada** spends more than \$9,265,000 per year conforming to Canada's bilingual requirements, requiring the airline to generate an additional \$185,000,000 in additional sales to cover these costs." (Jean-Marc Trottier, Bilingual Services at **Air Canada**, **Presentation to the Standing Joint Committee on Official Languages**, Sept. 9, 2001) More ridiculous are Toronto's commuter trains: "The **GO Transit** board has budgeted more than \$8.5 million over the next three years to put up French-language signs in communities such as Toronto, Brampton and Mississauga. ... **Francophone Affairs Minister Madeleine Meilleur** said **GO Transit** is subject to the **French Language Services Act** and must provide public services in both official languages. 'Toronto is a designated area and they have to comply.'" (Toronto Sun, February 18, 2005) Naturally, *la belle province* is very much exempt from the linguistic arm-twisting: "Quebec's premier may unleash the language police to crack down on the growing use of English in workplaces around the province. A report released on Monday found English continues to gain ground in the province. Premier **Jean Charest** says he favours doing whatever needs to be done to promote the French language and culture. That could include asking Quebec's language watchdog to tighten up enforcement of the rules, he said. Under **Bill 101**, the controversial language law passed in the 1970s, the **Office de la Langue Française**, can order businesses with more than 50 employees to translate all internal correspondence into French. 'The English language has become very much -- throughout the world -- the language of business,' Charest said. 'So the constant pressure will be there.' The report, released on Monday by the language watchdog, says the French language is in a 'precarious' state in Quebec as English usage continues to expand. It says efforts to require businesses to comply with language laws aren't halting the trend." (CBC, Nov. 23, 2004)