

CHÉTICAMP: AN ACADIAN COMMUNITY IN CONFLICT*

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Introduction

The Canadian Charter, which came into effect in 1982, seemed to usher in an era of optimism for Canada's English and French linguistic minorities. Section 23, paragraph (3) states that:

The right of citizens of Canada under subsections (1) and (2) to have their children receive primary and secondary education in the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of a province (a) applies wherever in the province the number of children of citizens who have a right is sufficient to warrant the provision to them out of public funds of the minority language instruction; and (b) includes, where the number of those children so warrants, the right to have them receive that instruction in minority language facilities provided out of public funds.¹

In conjunction with the Canadian Charter, there appears to be a heightened sensitivity towards francophone rights throughout Canada. A 1984 Ontario survey, for example, showed that "72% of the respondents were in favour of enacting a law to guarantee the availability of French-language services where numbers warrant."² While this survey refused to endorse the recommendations that Ontario recognize English and French as official languages, it did accept extended services.³ Moreover, for a host of political or legal reasons, other provinces have indicated their varying interest in broadening French services. Manitoba is in the process of translating its legal and legislative records into French; Nova Scotia has extended the use of French in Acadian schools; court cases in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta have adjudicated in favour of granting francophones greater control over their schooling; and the Northwest Territories' Government has conferred official status on French.⁴

Theoretically, based on the Charter, in tandem with the changing climate *vis-à-vis* linguistic rights, it may seem that francophone parents outside the province of Quebec can look forward to having their children educated exclusively in French. Ironically, not all francophone parents welcome this opportunity, and indeed, many resist any attempts to change the educational status quo. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine a case study of a Nova Scotia Acadian

community where attempts to increase the amount of French usage in the curriculum caused a storm of controversy, divided the community, and created personal conflicts. Structurally, the paper is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the historical background to the conflict, and Part II attempts to analyse some of the salient features that emerge from the conflict.

I

Historical Background

A brief examination of the location, population, and livelihoods of contemporary Acadian communities is essential to understanding their collective attitude towards French education. The combined Acadian (francophone) population of Nova Scotia, descendants of the Acadian Expulsion in the eighteenth century, is approximately 36,000 people, which represents less than 5% of the provincial total.⁵ Of the original nineteen Acadian settlements in Nova Scotia only six exist today. There is, however, an historical connection between the Acadian communities—they remain attached to their past, traditions, French language, and Roman Catholicism. This commitment is epitomized by the five historical societies which share the same goals: “étudier l’histoire et préserver les documents, les objets et toutes les traces de la culture acadienne.”⁶

Most of the Acadian areas are located along the coastline, contain no large or even medium-sized towns, and constitute no more than 34% of the total population of any region. There is no strong industrial base, and the most important sources of employment are fishing, tourism, forestry, and agriculture. The average Acadian income is below the provincial and national averages and the percentage of unemployment is higher.⁷

Until recent times, the Acadian communities scattered throughout the province had little contact or coordinated activities on a provincial level. Since 1977 Radio Canada has provided French radio and television service from its Maritime base in Moncton, New Brunswick. Although Nova Scotia does not have its own regional centre for French broadcasting, there is daily time allocated to local interests featuring correspondents in the major Acadian areas. Another communication linkage between Acadian centres is the only Acadian newspaper in Nova Scotia, *Le Courrier*, which is published in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. The paper, however, is handicapped by the great distances between the communities, the lack of population concentration in a given area, and the fact that “cette population est en grande partie assimilée...et celle qui ne l’est pas est fortement anglicisée.”⁸ Economically, *Le Courrier* receives funding from the provincial francophone association in return for advertisements, and one of its full-time employees “est un coopérant français entièrement payé par le gouvernement de la France.”⁹

The Fédération des acadiens de la Nouvelle-Ecosse

The Fédération des acadiens de la Nouvelle-Ecosse (FANE) was created in 1968.¹⁰ The federal government provided both moral and financial support for the association and pledged future assistance in the form of annual grants.¹¹ The principal aim of the FANE was "développer une stratégie politique pour revendiquer nos besoins de combattre l'assimilation et assurer la survivance de notre culture."¹² The educational system, in essence, was considered invaluable in the promotion of French language and culture. Hence, by 1971, the FANE officially stated that "l'éducation se situerait au premier rang des objectives[sic]."¹³

The most critical educational problem, according to the FANE, was the negative impact of the anglophone presence in the Acadian schools.¹⁴ Accordingly, the FANE faced a dual problem of convincing the educational authorities and the Acadians themselves of the gradual assimilation resulting from the increased anglophone school enrolments.¹⁵ The Department of Education was not viewed, however, as the crux of the problem; the major difficulty was to convince Acadians that their linguistic survival was threatened.¹⁶ Indeed, "certains parents même acadiens refusent parfois l'instruction bilingue pour leurs enfants."¹⁷ The FANE, therefore, focused its attention on converting Acadian parents to the need for a bilingual education.¹⁸

Gradually, the FANE stressed the theme of legal recognition, the official designation of Acadian schools, and the creation of all-French school boards. On the pragmatic level, the FANE lobbied the Department of Education and government officials for increased funding and a broadened French curriculum.¹⁹

Bill 65 and Acadian Status in Nova Scotia

By 1981, the political climate towards French education had improved, and in that year, an amendment to the Education Act (Bill 65) conferred legal status on French as a language of instruction in Acadian schools.²⁰ This action reversed the historical policy of mandatory use of English textbooks, curriculum, and English as a classroom language of instruction in Acadian schools.²¹ In the past, French "was tolerated rather than approved."²² Accordingly, the aim of Bill 65 was to "help promote and preserve the French language and Acadian culture."²³

Bill 65, in effect, was a distillate of compromises calculated to satisfy the minimum concerns of most affected parties. First, the separate identity of the Acadians was recognized. Second, the autonomous authority of the respective school boards was recognized since *any* request for Acadian status had to originate with them. As well, Acadian status could be phased in over a period of five years, or longer. Third, at the post-elementary level, students could pursue their studies exclusively in English. Hence, based on parental volition, students could be placed into an "English" or "Acadian" stream. Fourth, no major expenditure was to be required of either the provincial or municipal governments.²⁴ In sum, Bill 65 allocated new rights to one group without penalizing other groups financially or educationally.

Bill 65, however, was silent with respect to entrenched Acadian rights to a French curriculum, ignored the critical complaint of Anglo-assimilation, and required the initiation and approval of a given school board.²⁵ In essence, the designation of Acadian status hinged on the sympathy of individual school boards. Furthermore, Acadians, because of their small population base, lacked significant electoral power, and held a majority of seats on only one school board.²⁶

Another problem was that of finance. No special funding was legislated for potential changes in the school for separation of English and French streams, for additional staffing, teacher training for "immersion programmes," textbooks, or a planned discussion with the affected communities prior to and during the transition period. Consequently, school boards had no economic incentive to implement "Acadian schools" in their respective districts. Although the FANE organization was disappointed with the serious limitations of Bill 65, the legislation was viewed as a symbolic step in the right direction.²⁷

The Village of Chéticamp

The village of Chéticamp, established by former Acadian exiles who returned to Nova Scotia after the expulsion of 1755, extends for several kilometres along the Atlantic coastline of northwestern Cape Breton Island, bordered on the south and north by Acadian villages. Farther north is the English-speaking village of Pleasant Bay. Because of limited immigration and little outward migration, most residents are distantly related.²⁸

Until the late 1950s, Chéticamp was largely institutionally complete in the sense that most of its needs were met within the boundaries of the community, and it had little reason to interact with society at large. Its communal life, as expressed in such organs as the home, school, church, and commerce, was French in character and communication. Most employment was concentrated in the local fishing and forestry industries.

The construction of the Canso Causeway, the highway expansion of the Cabot Trail, and the development of the Cape Breton National Park in the mid-1950s effectively ended Chéticamp's isolation from the surrounding anglophone villages and English-speaking society in general. These events produced some profound economic and linguistic changes within Chéticamp. First, the growth of the tourist trade stimulated the construction of motels, restaurants, and handicraft boutiques. Second, the highway linkage to the adjacent anglophone villages allowed Chéticamp to become the centre of regional commerce, as well as schooling. Third, the National Park became an employment centre for the local residents. Concomitant with increased economic prosperity was the inevitable increase of English usage by local merchants, park employees, and virtually anyone in contact with English-speaking shoppers and tourists.²⁹

The present population of Chéticamp is around thirty-five hundred. The majority of the people belong to the same socio-economic class and share similar

interests, language, religion, and way of life.³⁰ The heart of the village is Saint-Pierre Church, situated next to its only school, Notre-Dame de l'Annonciation (NDA). The Sacré-Coeur Hospital, the Co-operative fish plant, two restaurants, two supermarkets, a drug store, several motels, a few tourist boutiques, and a community hall constitute other important landmarks in the village core. At the northern edge of the village is the Trois Pignons, a building that houses the regional branch of the FANE, the Société Saint-Pierre (the historical society), and the world-famous Elizabeth Le Fort Museum. Behind the Trois Pignons is the community arena. The village has no cinema or live theatre, but most people have television sets, and recently a local cable station called CHET Television was established.

The main sources of employment continue to be the fishing, forestry, and tourist industries. Although fishing is the main industry, forestry is second in economic importance, producing more than any other Acadian economic resource, and approximately 10% of the provincial total. Tourism, despite its short season, has become a strong growth industry and a vital component of the local economy. Indeed, annually over one-half million tourists pass through the village, which is situated at the western opening of the Cabot Trail.³¹

In the Chéticamp region there are seven co-operative movements, "et si l'on compte les membres de chacun, on arrive à un total de 6,500 membres, pour une population de 4,000 personnes, ce qui veut dire que la majorité des gens sont membres de plus d'une cooperative."³² The co-operative movement was considered more than a commercial enterprise for it was "un mode de vie, c'est tout un avenir."³³

The First Acadian Status School

In 1982, the Clare-Argyle School Board, located in southwestern Nova Scotia, was the first to implement an Acadian-status school.³⁴ Other Acadian areas petitioned their respective school boards for similar action. In late 1983, the Inverness Municipal School Board responded to Acadian requests by establishing a special committee (referred to as the Acadian Committee) to study the feasibility of an Acadian school at Chéticamp.³⁵ The Acadian Committee's mandate included an analysis of the guidelines of Bill 65, a discussion of its local application with the residents affected, a collection of the peoples' viewpoints, and subsequent recommendations to the board.³⁶

It is instructive to note that most of the recommendations of the Acadian Committee, however, were *not* adopted. Instead, the school board designated Notre Dame de l'Annonciation as a "partially Acadian" school.³⁷ The minor changes included French and English as administrative languages, a marginal increase in the number of courses offered in French, an optional French Immersion programme for anglophone students (primary to Grade 3), the creation of "English and French streams," and the guarantee that students could pursue their post-elementary studies entirely in English.³⁸

The Parents For Bilingualism

The official authorization of Acadian status for Chéticamp (July, 1985) caused a vitriolic reaction. Within weeks the village was polarized into two official opposing camps. One group, called the Parents for Bilingualism (PFB), was against the concept and advocated an educational status quo. The PFB had been organized since early 1983, but had waged an unsuccessful campaign to convince the proponents of Acadian status that it would be destructive for the community. Their opposition was predicated on five essential points. First, the present school system was considered well equipped to produce bilingual students. Second, the increase of French courses would weaken the English component of the curriculum and consequently handicap their children in a competitive English job market. Third, the placement of anglophone children in the immersion programme would cause them unnecessary stress and discord in the community. Fourth, the "dual streams" would cause a doubling-up of the classes because of the lack of numbers, and result in an inferior education for the anglophones. Fifth, the establishment of Acadian status was considered the first step towards an all-French school.³⁹

After the combined effort of meetings, briefs, petitions, and letters failed to dissuade the board to rescind Acadian status, the PFB focused its attention on the community and the vehicle of public forums. In June 1985, Marie Hébert, a native of St. Pierre-Jolys, Manitoba, was invited to Chéticamp to speak about the "destructive powers of the Francophone movement in general, and the Manitoba experience in particular."⁴⁰ Hébert claimed that the proposed "Acadian status" was analogous to a programme implemented in her home town. According to Hébert, despite similar school board promises, teachers lost their jobs, their school became exclusively French, and anglophone students were bussed to an all-English school. These statements went officially unchallenged because school board representatives were not invited.⁴¹

Following the talk, the PFB requested the audience to decide whether or not they wanted to have Acadian status in light of what took place in Manitoba according to Hébert. Subsequently, a vote was taken by a show of hands on whether or not the Acadian status was necessary or desirable for Chéticamp. The results were 482 against and 67 in favour.⁴² When the school board refused to rescind Acadian status, despite these results, the PFB and supporters withdrew their children from school the following September. The four-day boycott of classes was accompanied by placard-carrying parents and their children in front of the school as well as the regional office of the FANE. In spite of demonstrations involving as many as 100 school children at one point, the school board refused to change its decision.⁴³

Meanwhile, the Inverness Municipal Council, a *separate* entity from the school board, acquiesced to the PFB's demand for a plebiscite in order to determine the public's opinion towards Acadian status. It is important to differentiate between these two bodies: the municipal council consists of elected

members only, whereas the school board consists of both elected officials and provincial appointees.⁴⁴

Plebiscite Campaign

The announcement of a county-wide plebiscite exacerbated the mounting tension in the village and affected all citizens regardless of age, gender, or occupation. The fact that the two neighbouring anglophone villages of Pleasant Bay and Meat Cove were also allowed to vote fuelled the debate. Most community members felt compelled to take a stand. Consequently, many family members, neighbours, and friends found themselves on opposite sides of the issue.

A group of local residents, headed by Raymond Roach, established *Le Comité pour le Oui*, which promoted the concept of Acadian status. The PFB, headed by Arnold Dithurbide, became known as the *Non* committee (the acronym PFB will be used, however, for the sake of clarity).⁴⁵ Both groups waged a war of words in an attempt to win supporters. The PFB stressed the scenario of an eventual all-French school. On the other hand, the *Oui* group, while rejecting the concept of an all-French school, promoted the notion of an increased French curriculum and freedom of choice.⁴⁶

The *Oui* committee's first strategy meeting was highlighted by an impassioned address shared by two prominent community members. "Les Pères Anselme Chiasson et Charles Aucoin, ont parlé d'histoire et de fierté acadienne et de l'assimilation qui a fait disparaître plus de 13 sur 19 régions d'origine acadienne à travers la Nouvelle-Ecosse."⁴⁷ Roach asserted that their aim was to give Acadians freedom of choice and *not* to establish, as had been alleged by the PFB, an all-French school. He added that the Acadians did not want an all-French school, but felt many were confused about the actual details of Acadian status.⁴⁸ The meeting closed on a nationalistic note when the assemblage sang the *Hommage à Chéticamp*, "la chanson thème du 200ième anniversaire."⁴⁹

The dominant themes of the plebiscite campaign revolved around the all-French school, the credibility of the school board, the activities of the FANE, and the debate over whether there was already enough French instruction at the NDA school. The strategy employed by the *Oui* group included door-to-door canvassing, a number of public meetings, and the circulation of bilingual pamphlets delivered to each household. The pamphlet included the endorsements and photographs of the Minister of Education, the New Democratic Party leader, the chairman of the school board, the president of the FANE, the leader of the *Oui* group, and a prominent retired priest.⁵⁰

The school board joined in the propaganda war by placing a number of detailed bilingual explanations of a "partially Acadian school" in *Le Courrier*, installing a toll-free hotline for further information, and agreeing to meet with concerned residents. Moreover, the board stressed the voluntary nature of the programme and promised that "at no time would we permit a total French school in Chéticamp."⁵¹

A radio debate failed to clarify the school question. The three candidates vying for a school board seat stated their positions in favour of or against "Acadian status," but neglected to explain their rationales. One of the candidates, however, was Arnold Dithurbide, whose public opposition to the idea was the main plank in his political platform.⁵²

The pre-plebiscite period was filled with anxiety. There were public meetings, private strategy sessions, accusations, counter-accusations, threats, and media interviews, as well as incessant discussions among residents. The prevailing misconception that the plebiscite was *legally* binding intensified activities on both sides.⁵³ Inflamed frustrations contributed to a rash of minor criminal offences. "Une auto appartenant au Conseil scolaire d'Inverness et stationnée à côté de la maison d'un enseignant en faveur de l'école acadienne a été brûlée."⁵⁴ Three other minor offences, two of which were directed against the parish priest, were investigated by the police. For example, "Le téléphone du comité du Oui a été coupé....Les grosses lumières extérieures à l'église ont été cassées et deux pneus de l'auto du curé ont été crevés."⁵⁵

The plebiscite results did not resolve the conflict conclusively. The final vote was "1499 personnes...contre l'école acadienne...et 1010 personnes en faveur."⁵⁶ *Le Courrier* established the percentage at 59% against and 41% in favour.⁵⁷ Both committees claimed victory. The PFB maintained that the clear majority was evidence that the community rejected Acadian status. Indeed, Dithurbide, who had campaigned almost exclusively against Acadian status, won a school board seat and cited his personal election as proof that the electorate wanted him to carry on the fight.⁵⁸ Roach also claimed victory for the *Oui* forces by employing a different criterion of assessment. Roach argued that the plurality of votes was not an unequivocal rejection of Acadian status because many of the electorate thought that they were voting for or against an all-French school. Secondly, the overall francophone vote was much closer if the votes from the two anglophone areas were disregarded. Roach further argued that the debate over the raw numbers was irrelevant because there was a legal right to an Acadian school based on the Canadian Charter.⁵⁹

The plebiscite campaign left a legacy of broken friendships, family quarrels, a residue of bitterness, and a mutual resolve to continue the struggle. Dithurbide felt that his election justified his continued fight against Acadian status. On the other hand, the *Oui* group vowed that if the school board or provincial government reversed its decision for whatever reason, it was prepared "à aller jusqu'en Cour suprême du Canada pour défendre notre école acadienne."⁶⁰

The first meeting of the newly elected school board marked Dithurbide's first of several unsuccessful attempts to have Acadian status withdrawn.⁶¹ The PFB now focused their attention on the role of the FANE and its local corporate supporters. The FANE was labelled the prime agitator behind the community crisis, and an outsider. As well, the executive of the local Co-op, a staunch supporter of Acadian status, was threatened with an economic boycott if its membership were not withdrawn from the FANE. As a result, the Co-op store

was compelled to withdraw its corporate membership. Incidentally, this local incident prompted the FANE at the provincial level to eliminate its corporate membership category in favour of individual recruitment.⁶²

II

An examination of the two leadership groups revealed striking differences on fundamental issues such as group membership, Anglo-assimilation, bilingual education, the notion of conspiracy, French usage in community life, the value of Acadian history and culture, the role of outside agencies, and the involvement of government bodies. As noted, Part II will attempt to demonstrate how these issues revealed the significantly different aims and outlooks of community residents.

Group Membership

Most of the PFB's executive consisted of members who were either anglophone, were married to an anglophone, or had at least one parent who was an anglophone.⁶³ Although the PFB's opposition to Acadian status has been well documented, the motivations of their active supporters were unclear. Correspondence with *some* of the PFB's acknowledged supporters, or those who had taken part in the school boycott, indicated that at least one of the parents was an anglophone. Others felt that Acadian status was the same as an all-French school.⁶⁴

The *Oui* group received a strong endorsement from all the major francophone organizations in the Chéticamp region. The list included the regional branch of the FANE, the Société Sainte-Pierre, the Foyer-Ecole (Saint Joseph du Moines), the Commissaires de l'Ecole NDA, and the Acadian Co-op Council. This latter support was particularly significant because it represented all seven co-op movements of the area. The Co-op Council wrote that they "believe in preserving our culture and heritage. The family and the community have great responsibilities in this matter but the school has been and always will be the key instrument."⁶⁵ Each of these organizations supported Acadian status actively in the village and submitted letters requesting Acadian status to the school board and to the municipal and provincial governments. Private individuals who played active roles in the school conflict included most of the staff and administrative personnel at the NDA school, as well as a few prominent citizens such as Fathers Charles Aucoin and Anselme Chiasson.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that the parish priest was officially neutral, he was accused by the PFB of favouritism because he allowed the announcement of a pro-Acadian-status speaker to be placed in the parish bulletin, and refused to entertain the possibility of the occasional English mass.⁶⁷

Apart from the principal players, it was difficult to determine the views of most residents regarding the school issue. The plebiscite results, nonetheless, indicated that the majority of local francophones supported the PFB.⁶⁸ A

questionnaire consequently was circulated in the community in the hope that a better understanding of the controversy might be ascertained. Use of the questionnaire has provided some useful, albeit impressionistic, data regarding the motivations of certain identifiable groups. It should be stressed that the questionnaire was administered while the school question was still an emotional issue. Second, the PFB refused to sanction or circulate the questionnaire amongst its supporters because of personal questions concerning linguistic competency, and French usage at home and in the workplace.⁶⁹ In spite of these limitations, the results furnished some useful insights into how some citizens and groups perceived the controversy.

Due to the lengthy details of the questionnaire, however, only the salient results will be cited.⁷⁰ First, there was a general belief that "Acadian status" was misunderstood by many community members. Second, most of the teachers were in favour of Acadian status, advocated increased French programmes, supported the need to produce bilingual students, and felt that the Canadian Charter guaranteed a choice of public education in French or English. Incidentally, only one respondent was *not* a member of the FANE. Third, *all* respondents preferred English news and entertainment media. Fourth, almost one-half of the respondents supported Acadian status, and were members or supporters of the FANE (roughly 58%). Fifth, the primary role of the school was seen as a vehicle to produce bilingual students.⁷¹

Anglo-Assimilation

The PFB agreed that assimilation was occurring at a rapid rate in the Acadian areas of Nova Scotia but denied that this phenomenon was a local problem. Dithurbide declared that there was confusion over national and provincial figures. He said that "the provincial average may be 17 percent or whatever, but here in Chéticamp assimilation has been stabilized...no one has lost their [sic] French...if anything, they are learning more French."⁷² The fact that French was spoken in most commercial outlets and private homes of the village was considered empirical evidence that the French language and culture were not in danger of disappearing. Dithurbide further stated that "people could not lose their mother tongue unless they wanted to."⁷³

Conversely, the *Oui* supporters were convinced that the forces of assimilation had been chipping away at their French language since the 1960s. There was a perceived increased use of English in the village and a steady decline in the quality of spoken French. This contention was based on the Secretary of State's annual reports, sundry research studies, and the Statistics Canada figures of 1981, which placed the rate of assimilation for Inverness County at 16%.⁷⁴

Bilingual Education

Parents for Bilingualism asserted that the NDA school was adequately equipped to produce bilingual students, as expressed by the number of graduates

pursuing university studies in either language. This conviction was reinforced by the observation that some of their own children could speak both languages fluently, and experienced little difficulty in switching from one language to the other. Moreover, the PFB maintained support for an all-French elementary school, but suggested that by the beginning of grade seven no more than one or two courses should be needed to sustain the knowledge of French. This belief was based on the notion that the cumulative linguistic knowledge of seven years of French would render a person irreversibly fluent. Post-elementary schooling should therefore focus on the development of English written and verbal skills in order to equip students effectively for the English work-world. The only complaints about the present school system concerned the quality of English spoken by teachers and students, and the “pro-French” teachers who advocated exclusively francophone activities such as watching French television programmes and reading French books and newspapers.⁷⁵

According to the *Oui* committee, there were fundamental problems with the so-called “all-French” elementary school. A true French ambience could not exist because the anglophone students could not communicate in French. Students were allowed to ask questions and receive answers in English; English usage was officially discouraged but was prevalent during non-class time; and teachers were incapable of dealing with the inherent problems of two linguistic groups in the same classroom. The *Oui* president pointed out that the only viable solution was a French immersion programme to help anglophone students learn French. However, previous attempts to implement an immersion programme for anglophones had met with strong opposition from the PFB group.⁷⁶

The influx of additional anglophones at the junior-high level from the two English areas aggravated the inability to create a French atmosphere. More students spoke only English, few courses were taught in French, and there were incidents in which the use of French was criticized.⁷⁷ A Pleasant Bay group for example, registered an official complaint with the school board over the use of French during non-French periods: “During the instructional period of any English course, is it permissible, under the Provincial School System to have questions asked and answers given in the French language with English students present?”⁷⁸

According to the *Oui* committee, the increased anglophone enrolment was inextricably linked to the assimilation process. In 1982, Wilfred Boudreau, the principal of the NDA school, said that “28.6 pour cent des étudiants de la septième à la douzième année...sont incapables de suivre le programme régulier en français offert à l'école...[et]...ces étudiants sont tous des anglophones.”⁷⁹ Boudreau also stated that “il y a beaucoup de ces enfants qui proviennent de familles acadiennes qui ont vécu ailleurs et qui sont maintenant déménagées à Chéticamp.”⁸⁰ The immediate problem was resolved with the hiring of two additional teachers but no long-term strategy was implemented. Boudreau wrote: “Je suis convaincu que le plus d'étudiants anglophones on a, le plus facile et le plus vite l'anglicisation des étudiants acadiens se fera. A moins que l'on ait un programme

pour contre balancer cela.”⁸¹ Boudreau’s analysis was supported by the guidance counsellor for the four Acadian schools of Inverness County. Lionel Deveau posited that “pour éviter l’assimilation...il est nécessaire de continuer les classes d’immersion dans les écoles élémentaires.”⁸²

A Need For a Bilingual Community

The PFB expressed the view that English residents should not be forced to speak in French and that both languages should be respected equally. Their unsuccessful attempts to have the home and school meetings conducted in both languages attests to the group’s dissatisfaction with a unilingual French community. This dispute precipitated the eventual dissolution of the association. In short, it was considered polite for a bilingual person to speak to a unilingual anglophone in English. This attitude applied to formal as well as informal gatherings regardless of the size of the audience. The PFB, for instance, claimed that it was “only common sense” for the local chamber of commerce to conduct its meetings in English because one of its members could speak only English. The PFB requests for the occasional Catholic mass in English and the publication of a bilingual parish bulletin further illustrate their dissatisfaction with French-only services. Ironically, the PFB did endorse some public functions that operated only in English. A minor hockey banquet held in 1985, for example, which involved a large contingent of francophone players and personnel from Chéticamp, was conducted exclusively in English. The PFB defended this action on the premise that all the Acadians could understand English and a bilingual programme would be too time-consuming.⁸³

The *Oui* group professed its willingness to live together with the anglophones with a minimum of friction and a maximum of tolerance and understanding. They were opposed, however, to the increased use of English in all facets of village life. The PFB was portrayed as a group of insensitive people who refused to recognize the legitimacy of the French language and Acadian culture. The previously mentioned “hockey banquet” was cited as an example of the PFB’s entrenched attitude against French usage. Roach felt that it was insulting that anglophones had lived in Chéticamp for many years without learning or attempting to speak French. Accordingly, “it was no surprise that they were unable to understand or appreciate the erosion of French language and culture.”⁸⁴

Outside Agencies

A study of the Chéticamp school conflict cannot be made without reference to the first Acadian community to implement Acadian status. The amalgamation of the Clare and Argyle areas in 1982 was followed by the introduction of the first Acadian-status school.⁸⁵ This action precipitated a bitter struggle similar to the Chéticamp controversy, which resulted in a series of protests, public confrontations, and opposing groups.⁸⁶ This situation played a vital role in inflaming the

fears and shaping the strategy of the PFB. For instance, the “executive” of the movement to stop Acadian status in Clare-Argyle warned the PFB of the consequences of this legislation. In brief, it was argued that the FANE exercised greater control over their local schooling, all school positions (even janitorial) were filled by a bilingual staff, preferential treatment was given to the francophone students, anglophone students were unable to get adequate French courses, and only French-speaking parents were invited to school functions.⁸⁷

It is important to emphasize that much of the rhetoric used in the Clare-Argyle struggle surfaced in the Chéticamp conflict. The notion of conspiracy was blatant. The members of the FANE were portrayed as paid political agitators who promoted “a linguistic and cultural apartheid whose evil effects could last for generations.”⁸⁸ Although it is unclear how deeply the Clare-Argyle leadership were involved in the Chéticamp dispute, it is clear that they gave moral support and advice to the PFB.

Outside of the Chéticamp area, there were many francophone organizations across the Maritimes and Canada that registered their moral support for Acadian status. Within Nova Scotia, the FANE, the Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Ecosse, the Femmes Acadiennes de la Nouvelle-Ecosse, and other francophone associations gave their encouragement and support.⁸⁹

Beyond the francophone organizational network there were other groups and individuals who played an active role. The Inverness Municipal School Board, albeit late in the conflict, waged an information blitz in order to allay the fears of an eventual all-French school. The Minister of Education, who was responsible for Bill 65, promoted its merits, met with opposing groups, and rejected the legal right of the municipal council to sanction the plebiscite. The local Conservative member of the Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly, Dr. Jim MacLean, echoed his views. The official opposition Liberal party vacillated on the issue. The Liberals voted for Bill 65 but supported the legitimacy of the “plebiscite,” and later reversed their position again by accepting Acadian status.⁹⁰

The most significant contribution by a politician, after the passage of Bill 65, was that of Alexa McDonough, leader of the provincial New Democratic Party. McDonough’s support for Acadian status was based on philosophical principles. She maintained that Acadians had an historical and legal right to an education in their own language. Her conviction was predicated both on Bill 65 and the Canadian Charter. At any rate, the plebiscite was depicted as legally pointless because the numerical majority could not decide the legal rights of the minority. McDonough met with the conflicting parties on several occasions in an attempt to help resolve the dispute. She praised the provincial government’s landmark decision for its support of Acadian status for Chéticamp. Yet McDonough criticized the government and the school board for not involving the community early enough in the process in order to obviate any hysterical or exaggerated speculations associated with a “partially Acadian” school.⁹¹

The Notion of Conspiracy

The Parents for Bilingualism suggested that Acadian status was an integral part of a francophone plan to gain control of the school system.⁹² They wrote that

the Francophone organization in Canada takes its orders from Quebec separatists. They thrive on destruction. They are people who have ripped the Canadian flag down from the Quebec legislative assembly. They used the Canadian flag for a mat at their assemblies. They will surely be successful in making Chéticamp into another French ghetto because those who have the power to stop them have turned their backs on the people of Chéticamp just as they have also done in Newcastle, New Brunswick, St.-Pierre-Jolys, Manitoba and Clare-Argyle.⁹³

This perceived global policy of community control via the school system was allegedly directed by the Fédération des Francophones hors Québec at the national level, and channelled through a network of provincial associations. The PFB further asserted that the FFHQ and its provincial counterparts received financial assistance through the Secretary of State's office, the Quebec government, and the government of France. As well, according to the PFB, the FANE was depicted as a well-financed pressure group supported by the provincial Conservative government, the Inverness Municipal School Board, and the New Democratic Party.⁹⁴ The notion of a francophone conspiracy contributed to a unilateral interpretation of anything affecting Chéticamp. In effect, the PFB described themselves as a small community-based group fighting against overwhelming odds to preserve their constitutional rights to a language of their choice. Despite the fact that they "had fought an election campaign and won...the Government refused to recognize the democratic rights of the majority."⁹⁵

The Involvement of Government Agencies

As indicated, there was a general state of confusion over the nature of the proposed Acadian school in Chéticamp.⁹⁶ In this regard, the relevant governments failed to deliver a clear, unequivocal policy statement to the people of Chéticamp. This absence permitted rumour, speculation, and exaggeration to flourish during a three-year period. The provincial government's decision not to publicize the findings of the Ministerial Committee, and the municipal government's refusal to meet residents in the early planning stages, created an atmosphere of misunderstanding and mistrust.

This was compounded by the inaction, poor planning, and insensitivity of certain governmental bodies. The provincial government Ministerial Committee, for example, responsible for the study of Acadian schooling in 1981, did not communicate directly with members of the Acadian communities. Indeed, given the antecedent language problems experienced during the Clare-Argyle conflict,

a provincial government information programme concerning Bill 65 and Acadian status would have been invaluable. The provincial department of education dismissed any potential problems in Chéticamp because, unlike Clare-Argyle, the community was largely French-Acadian and the changes were minor in scope.⁹⁷

The Inverness Municipal School Board, as well, could have forestalled many of the misunderstandings regarding Acadian status. The Acadian Committee appointed by the school board had the mandate to study the feasibility of such a programme but the public was not cognizant of its intentions. The board's lack of direct contact with the citizens and the failure to provide the Acadian Committee with details of its intentions caused confusion and generated speculation. Thus, when the Acadian Committee was unable to answer basic germane questions, the Parents for Bilingualism filled this vacuum with their own conspiratorial explanations. By contrast, the Acadian Committee appeared to be poorly informed and consequently lost some credibility. Likewise, the school board did not draw upon the Clare-Argyle experiences where a private six-month study preceded the implementation of an Acadian-status school.⁹⁸

The school board's eleventh-hour attempt to furnish Chéticamp residents with clear detailed information was met by a wall of cynicism and suspicion. Perhaps the board's most damaging action was its refusal to give an unequivocal assurance that anglophone students would never be bussed to an English school outside the village. The rumoured future regional high school for Chéticamp anglophones gained greater currency as a plausible scenario.⁹⁹

The Roots of Conflict

In Chéticamp, the struggle for "Acadian status" was depicted as a battle against anglicization in the school in particular, and the community in general. Its realization was the product of a local effort by the *Oui* group, vigorously endorsed by the FANE, as well as the community and provincial francophone organizations. Furthermore, *all* the recognized community leaders including the school administrators, most of the teachers, business leaders, and prominent retired priests endorsed the initiatives to increase French usage in the school.

The designation of Acadian status, despite its minor educational changes, provoked a clash of incompatible perceptions of community values. In effect, the two opposing groups viewed the NDA school as a vehicle to achieve a "bilingual education," albeit subject to their different definitions. The PFB postulated that the present system could produce bilingual students, and, therefore, the school should concentrate on a quality English education in order to allow their children to compete successfully in the work-force. For them, assimilation, at least in Chéticamp, was a specious issue. By contrast, for the *Oui* group, assimilation was inexorable unless counterbalancing measures were enacted. The school, for instance, represented the bulwark against Anglo-assimilation. Hence, the group's immediate recommendations were the implemen-

tation of immersion instruction to assist the anglophones to become bilingual, and an increased French curriculum at the post-elementary level.

On the community level, the school controversy crystallized the radical changes that had transpired since the 1960s. The increased contact with anglophones, the influx of anglophones, intermarriage with non-francophones, pervasive English media, and the widespread propensity to speak English deepened the chasm and accelerated assimilation. The once homogeneously French-Acadian Catholic village now had a sizeable anglophone, and to a lesser extent Protestant, population.¹⁰⁰ The NDA school, formerly with an all-French enrolment, was transformed into a bilingual institution in less than two decades. By 1986, almost 30% of the school population could not handle the school programme in French, and the community's anglophone population was roughly 6%.

It is no surprise, therefore, that language cleavages have emerged as friction points in most arenas of community life. As one of the conflicting parties stated, "L'école était le terrain de bataille pour gagner la communauté."¹⁰¹ In essence, one group favours a community where residents may communicate exclusively in English but possess the ability to speak French. The opposing group favours a community where the residents communicate mostly in French, but possess the ability to speak English fluently.

Although "partially-Acadian status" was heralded as a progressive step, the "Oui" committee insisted that this measure did not deal with the critical problem of increased English in the NDA school. As a result, a prominent lawyer was engaged to peruse the viability of legal action to acquire greater control over education, and more French content in the school, pursuant to the terms of the Canadian Charter.¹⁰² On the other hand, the PFB vowed to continue their opposition to the legislation, and also to acquire community services in both languages.

The majority of the community members were torn between these polarized positions. However, research data suggests that even after "Acadian status" was explained in clear terms, there was a large segment of the francophone community that still opposed it. The most significant concern was the perception that any decrease of English content in the schools would handicap the economic and social mobility of English-speaking children.¹⁰³ The FANE acknowledged the prevalence of this view. Further, it advocated an urgent education campaign to show Acadians that their linguistic and cultural survival was in jeopardy, and to convince them that more French usage in the school would not cause a deterioration in the mastery of English. Therefore, given the opposing perceptions, the prognosis is additional conflict unless the underlying conditions for conflict are resolved.

Conclusion

In the historical context, Chéticamp has followed the national trend of increased anglicization of French minorities that has taken place over the last few

decades. Indeed, "Acadian assimilation" was addressed by the FANE at its first annual meeting in 1969 and every subsequent year thereafter. In 1981, after years of intense lobbying which included private meetings with government officials, marshalling Acadian support, sponsoring research studies, letter campaigns, and other pressure tactics, the government recognized some of the FANE's demands by passing Bill 65. Although beyond the theme of this paper, it should be noted, parenthetically, that both provincial and municipal governments have demonstrated a reluctance to allocate educational rights in French. The long struggle for Bill 65 attests to this thesis. As well, despite its official goal, there is little in this new legislation to promote and preserve the French language and Acadian culture.

Chéticamp was able to resist assimilation largely because of isolation, vigorous Church leadership, limited contact with the English world, and a strong sense of community. In the last twenty years, however, these four aspects of Chéticamp life have been critically weakened or completely destroyed. First, isolation has come to an end. Contact with English-speaking neighbours and tourists, as well as the presence of anglophone residents, has altered village life. Second, a new relationship has developed between the clergy and the community. The dynamic leadership exercised formerly by the clergy no longer exists. Even during the plebiscite the parish priest maintained a neutral public profile despite his acknowledged support for all-French religious services. Third, the greatest threat of all is perhaps the popularity of English media. Thus the values of an overwhelmingly English-speaking society reach almost every home.¹⁰⁴ At any rate, French television and radio programmes have not been able to compete successfully with English ones. As noted, even the most ardent supporters of Acadian status prefer English programmes. Fourth, the notion of work and economic success has supplanted the former values of community, family, and the church. Like other Canadian minorities, there is a fear that the use of French will lessen the chances of financial and social success.¹⁰⁵

The Chéticamp conflict shared many characteristics with antecedent linguistic struggles in Clare-Argyle (Nova Scotia), Tecumseh and Sturgeon Falls (Ontario), St. Pierre-Jolys (Manitoba), and Grand Falls (New Brunswick).¹⁰⁶ In these cases the citizenry also reluctantly took positions regarding attempts to increase French usage in their respective communities. In more recent times, the Chéticamp controversy caused important repercussions at the local, provincial, and regional levels.¹⁰⁷

In conclusion, this study raises two pivotal problems that should cause reflection among those who are interested in the future of French-speaking populations. First, anglophone-led groups and anglophone-controlled institutions may resist the expansion of French instruction even in predominantly francophone areas, especially if there is a need to share facilities with anglophones. Second, francophone parents may oppose similar changes because of the perception that a decrease in English usage may weaken the economic mobility of their children.

Epilogue

The Inverness Municipal School Board officially implemented the first stage of Acadian status in September 1986. The full effect, however, will not be complete for all grades until 1992. In essence, Acadian status for Notre Dame de l'Annonciation school guaranteed a bilingual administration, an optional French immersion programme for non-francophones at the elementary level, an all-English stream for those who wish to follow their education entirely in English in the post-elementary grades, and a combined number of courses taught in English and French for students who chose the Acadian stream.

It would appear that most Chéticamp residents have accepted the educational changes. Threats of further school boycotts, litigation, or refusal to accept school changes have not materialized. In fact, the implementation of the NDA's elementary-French immersion in 1986 marked the first major test for the community because it segregated English-speaking and French-speaking students. Again, parental opposition to this programme dissipated; nine English-speaking students were placed in this programme, whereas the other primary class had an enrolment of twenty-one French-speaking pupils. Thus in many respects, the majority of Chéticamp residents were willing to accept minor school changes, but were unwilling to accept the concept of an all-French school.

NOTES

- * An earlier version of this paper was given at the conference of the Canadian History of Education Association, in London, Ontario, October 1988.
- 1. *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Section 23. Minority Language Education Rights (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1982).
- 2. *The Commissioner of Official Languages Annual Report* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1985), 156.
- 3. *Ibid.*
- 4. *Ibid.*
- 5. *La Vie Acadienne: Etre Acadien d'aujourd'hui*, (Pointe-de-l'Eglise, N.S.: Université Sainte-Anne, 1985), 19.
- 6. *Ibid.*, 66.
- 7. *Ibid.*, 19-45.
- 8. *Ibid.*, 73.
- 9. *Ibid.*
- 10. The FANE's Minutes/Papers, Chéticamp, N.S., Feb. 1986.
- 11. *La Vie Acadienne*, 26.
- 12. *Le Courrier*, Yarmouth, N.S., 30 Oct. 1969, 2.
- 13. The FANE's Minutes/Papers, 1971.
- 14. *Ibid.*
- 15. *Ibid.* In 1972 and 1976 formal requests were made to the Department of Education to investigate the long-term effects of the anglophone enrolment.
- 16. *Ibid.* In 1973, the FANE suggested that "Le Ministre n'est pas toujours à blâmer au sujet de l'éducation."

17. Ibid., 1972.
18. Ibid. It should be stressed that there was never consensual support for an all-French school.
19. Ibid., 1984. Before 1974 there was not even a school manual in French.
20. *Department of Education Press Release*, Halifax, N.S. (1983), 3.
21. *La Vie Acadienne*, 18.
22. *Department of Education Press Release*, 1983.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid. It was also subject to the arbitrary approval of the Minister of Education.
26. *La Vie Acadienne*, 16-20.
27. Interview with Ben Samson, president of the FANE, Halifax, Jan. 1986.
28. Bona Arsenault, *History of the Acadians* (Québec: Le Conseil de la Vie française en Amérique, 1966), 227. Most local Acadians can trace their ancestry to "Les 14 Vieux" who settled Chéticamp in 1785 as hired fishermen for Charles Robin.
29. *La Vie Acadienne*, 19.
30. Interview with Ben Samson.
31. *La Vie Acadienne*, 14-48.
32. Ibid., 53.
33. Ibid. In 1983, over one-half (18,682) of Nova Scotian Acadians were registered members of credit unions.
34. The FANE Minutes/Papers, 1983-84.
35. The Acadian Committee Minutes/Papers, Chéticamp, N.S., 1984. The Acadian Committee members were selected from Chéticamp and the surrounding districts. They included parents, teachers, the NDA School principal, two bilingual representatives from Pleasant Bay, a regional representative from the FANE, and a school board appointee.
36. Ibid. The Acadian Committee held a total of fifteen public or private meetings with the concerned citizens, parents, and special groups.
37. *Le Courrier*, 16 Oct. 1985, 1. The NDA school, in 1985, had a population of roughly 630 students from primary to Grade 12.
38. Inverness Municipal School Board Press Release, Port Hawkesbury, N.S., 1985.
39. Interview with the leadership of the Parents For Bilingualism, and review of their official written documentation, Chéticamp, N.S., 4 Feb. 1986.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid. It is important to stress that a large percentage of the adult population turned out for this meeting.
43. Ibid. An agreement was reached whereby the students returned to school, but they were not penalized for lost time.
44. Municipal Council Minutes, Port Hawkesbury, N.S., 18 Sept. 1985, 5.
45. "Comité pour le Oui" Minutes, Chéticamp, N.S., 5 Oct. 1985-10 Feb. 1986. Throughout the plebiscite campaign there was a constant reference to the PFB instead of the "non" committee.
46. Interview with Raymond Roach, President of the Oui committee, Chéticamp, N.S., 4 Feb. 1986.
47. *Le Courrier*, 16 Oct. 1985, 1.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid, 23 Oct. 1985, 2.

50. Interview with Raymond Roach.
51. *Le Courrier*, 2 Oct. 1985.
52. *Ibid.* The plebiscite question was to be included on the school board election ballot in the pending election.
53. This observation was based on interviews with the principals involved in the school controversy, newspaper editorials, and "Letters to the Editor" columns of local newspapers.
54. *Le Courrier*, 23 Oct. 1985, 1.
55. *Ibid.*, 1-2.
56. *Ibid.*, 30 Oct. 1985, 1.
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*, 2. The voting results were Dithurbide 2, 359, Poirier 1,719, and Comeau 1,112 respectively.
59. *Ibid.*, 23 Oct. 1985, 1.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*, 8 Feb. 1986. Dithurbide's motion to reverse the Acadian-status decision was defeated by a vote of 6-2. Dithurbide's immediate response was a temporary refusal to participate in other school board discussions.
62. *Ibid.* Interview with Réjean Aucoin, coordonnateur régional de la FANE, Chéticamp, N.S., 4 Feb. 1986.
63. Interview with leadership of the Parents For Bilingualism. It appears that the nucleus of the PFB was never more than nine members.
64. The majority of the respondents were unilingual anglophones (12 out of 17), and all the respondents felt that Acadian status meant an all-French school, either in its present form, or eventually.
65. The FANE Minutes/Papers, 13 Mar. 1985. The Council further maintained that they wanted a bilingual school system where Acadians had "the right to an education in their own language and to accommodate the English children in a way that they would also be bilingual."
66. *Ibid.*
67. Interview with the leadership of the PFB.
68. As well, the FANE admitted that the majority of Chéticamp francophones did not see the need for Acadian status.
69. *Ibid.* For example, the PFB objected strongly to the question: "Do you speak French to your children?"
70. For further details consult Richard Julien, *Chéticamp: An Acadian Community in Conflict* (M.Ed thesis, University of Alberta, 1986). It is important to stress that roughly 30% of the community, 60% of the teachers, and only 20% of the students returned their questionnaires.
71. Due to the perceived volatility of the school controversy, the school board authorities refused permission for the writer to distribute questionnaires or even to visit the school.
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*
74. Interview with Raymond Roach. Assimilation was defined as: "Lorsqu'une partie de la population d'un territoire donné perd sa langue pour emprunter celle d'une autre population." (For more information concerning the method of analysis employed consult *Atlas de l'Acadie. Petit Atlas des Francophones des Maritimes* (Moncton, N.B.: Profat, 1976), 30.

75. Interview with the leadership of the PFB.
76. Interview with Raymond Roach.
77. Ibid.
78. "Pleasant Bay Parents to the Inverness Municipal School Board," Port Hawkesbury, N.S., 12 Dec. 1985.
79. *Le Courrier*, 12 Feb. 1982.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Interview with the leadership of the PFB.
84. Interview with Raymond Roach.
85. *Le Courrier*, 20 Jan. 1982.
86. Ibid.
87. "A Group of Concerned Acadians to the Parents For Bilingualism," Clare-Argyle, N.S., 15 Oct. 1985.
88. Ibid.
89. The FANE Minutes/Papers, Nov. 1985.
90. Ibid.
91. Interview with Alexa McDonough, Halifax, 30 Jan. 1986.
92. Interview with the PFB.
93. The PFB Papers/Correspondence, Chéticamp, n.d.
94. Interview with the PFB.
95. Ibid.
96. Research data such as newspaper interviews, letters to the editor, open-line radio programmes, personal interviews, and correspondence suggest that many people were genuinely confused over the issue.
97. Interview with Department of Education senior officials, Halifax, N.S., 26 Jan. 1985.
98. Ibid.
99. Interview with the coordinnateur régional de la FANE.
100. Interview with Ben Samson. Correspondence with one of the pastors of the two local Protestant churches indicates that the services are conducted only in English.
101. Interview with the coordinnateur régional de la FANE.
102. Interview with Raymond Roach. This latter objective has been placed in abeyance until the legacy of community acrimony has been overcome and the support of more residents secured.
103. Ibid.
104. "It has been estimated that Canadian children spend twice as much time watching television as they do sitting in school." Howard and Tamara Palmer, eds, *A History of French-Speaking Albertans* (Saskatoon: Western Prairie Books, 1985), 106.
105. Ibid., 107.
106. For a detailed comparison, consult Julien, *Chéticamp*.
107. Some other Acadian communities in Cape Breton, for example, requested and received government support for Acadian status. Further, there is a similar movement to achieve greater linguistic rights for the P.E.I. francophones.