



## “La Bataille de St. Léonard”: An insult to Italian-Canadians

OPINION

« The documentary *La Bataille de St. Léonard* provides an incomplete account of the 1969 St. Léonard riot.. »



The film tells the story of Raymond Lemieux’s attempt to make French the exclusive language of instruction in all St. Léonard schools. Lemieux advocated this model for all Quebec schools.

The film dutifully voices the narrative that Italians rejected the French language and enrolled their children in English schools to foster their “upward social mobility”, because Italian immigrants believed that English was the language of economic success and French was the language of losers.

This narrative is both false and insulting to Quebec’s Italian community. Italian immigrants wanted their children to learn the French and English languages. Lemieux wanted to ban bilingual education. For this he is being hailed as a language hero.

Lemieux was the innovator of the notion that bilingualism threatens the French language. An absurd idea unsupported by science or common sense but one that continues to be promoted by separatists and nationalists, and their many bilingual politicians and pundits. Félix Rose omits to address the history of the rejection of children of Italian immigrants by Quebec’s French Catholic educational system during the 1950s and 1960s. This discrimination was also meted out to Jewish, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant and any other child who was not Catholic.

People who lived this experience could have easily been interviewed, starting with myself. This history gets no screen time because it challenges the separatist-nationalist narrative that has framed the language issue for some 50 years — the narrative Rose has heard his whole life and knows his audience wants to hear.

Quebec’s French Catholic education system explicitly mandated the exclusion of Jewish, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant and all non-Catholic children from French Catholic schools and diverted these students to English schools.

This institutional discrimination in Quebec’s educational infrastructure cannot explain, however, the exclusion of Italian Catholic students from French Catholic Schools. Only prejudice can explain why Italian-origin children were rejected from French Catholic schools. Italians were Catholic and spoke a romance language at home that was etymologically closer to French than English, making it easier for Italian children to learn French as opposed to English.

But Italians had unusual names that were considered difficult to pronounce. Italians were perceived as being “different” from “la race canadienne française”, a notion that still resonated during this period. The exclusion of Italian students was driven by the desire to maintain status quo homogeneity in French Catholic classrooms.



## “La Bataille de St. Léonard”: An insult to Italian-Canadians (Continued)

OPINION

This diversion of Italian Catholic and all non-Catholic students to English schools occurred when Francophone Quebec had the highest birth rate in the western world.

Demographic reinforcement of the French language by immigrant students was not required and, for the intolerant, not desired.

When the birth rate drastically declined by the late 1960s, separatists and nationalists took to blaming immigrant parents, for sending their children to the schools that they were directed to send them to! Scapegoating immigrants for Quebec’s social challenges continue to this day and it started with Italian immigrants in St. Léonard.

A truthful consideration of the 1969 St. Léonard riot would begin with an acceptance of responsibility for the reality that for some 20 years prior to the riot, Quebec’s Catholic education system engaged in a compulsory and systemic anglicization of immigrant children which impacted negatively, and in a significant manner, on the French language.

The film fails to engage in a fulsome and honest explanation of why children of Italian immigrants attended English schools, preferring to adhere to the reductive narrative of Italian parents snubbing the French language in the interest of securing “upward social mobility” for their children.

There was no mainstream Francophone political support for what Lemieux was trying to accomplish in St. Léonard.

The 1977 Charter of the French Language enacted by the newly elected separatist PQ government rejected Lemieux’s vision.

Although French was declared the official language of Quebec, English language education rights were respected and not eliminated even though at that time the Quebec government had unfettered legislative authority to eliminate those rights if it wanted to. Unlike Lemieux, the PQ respected the anglophone community’s established education rights.

English-speaking communities continue to manage schools across Quebec that graduate bilingual students capable of working in French.

The mission of a documentary filmmaker is to uncover truths and present them in a compelling manner.

Félix Rose failed that mission.

RALPH MASTROMONACO

Ralph Mastro Monaco practises criminal law in Montreal.

[www.mastromonaco.ca](http://www.mastromonaco.ca)