

Chapter 5

The Exotic Animals: From Strange Birds to Mouse Man

G rard Bouchard might very well have professed, halfway through the tour, that the forums had not become "freak shows, therapy sessions, collective ventings," as several cynics in the media had claimed, but he was only half right. Certainly, the forums attracted a large number of right-minded people, kind citizens who came to politely testify to their openness toward minorities of "foreign" religions. But what to make of others who, by their very aspect and way of expressing themselves, set themselves apart from the crowd?

These exotic specimens added a bit of colour to our roving circus. Let's admit it: we listened to most of them like you'd listen to the village idiot, throwing ourselves knowing glances. But it's also true that each person, in his own way, helped make the debate a little richer. Of course, their speeches were often off-the-wall and the plots that some denounced were strictly imaginary, but the fact remains that most of them also expressed thoughts that were not only coherent, but were taken up by others afterward.

Most of them expressed an aversion to the Catholic church, something shared by a large number of other speakers, and made appeals for calm and tolerance. Some eccentrics added even more to the collective therapy by providing a lesson in the necessity of living together in peace.

We were struck by the originality of certain speakers from the very first forum, in Gatineau on Sept. 11, when a man presented himself to the commissioners carrying a crucifix in one hand and a globe in the other.

"I wanted to show you my favourite planet," Louis-Marie Poissant began. "I call it my blue bomb, demonstrator bomb, environmental bomb."

He described himself as a follower of the teachings of Gandhi and a graduate in agronomy, and held forth on his vision of Quebec's place on this imperiled globe. "Out of 8 billion, I'm going to talk to you about 8 million homo sapiens," a people which, in his opinion, isn't growing rapidly enough. His solution? Give children in this province the right to vote! In his eyes, this expansion of democracy would help ease the problem of the declining birth rate in Quebec. "Where does it come from, this decline? My hypothesis - and the more I think about it, the more I think it makes sense - is that 20 per cent of the population doesn't vote, and this 20 per cent is young people under 18 years of age."

G rard Bouchard started chuckling gently. "You're going to tell me that parents vote for their children - that's obvious," continued the man unperturbed. "But I'm telling you this because every one of the institutions we've given ourselves - charters, the Canadian constitution, democracy, all that - doesn't take this into account. And it's these people who are the ones excluded from the system, the people who are age zero to 18."

Unable to restrain himself, Bouchard added the nuance: "At zero, there might be a bit of a problem."

In the end, it took a poet to lay everything bare - literally.

This one had long, untidy hair and sat in the front row at the first forum in Laval.

"My name is Daniel Gingras, I'm on social assistance, I'm an andragogue, writer, poet. I'm the first poet who, after the World Trade Centre, tried to get a letter to Mr. George Bush and Mr. Jean Chr tien to warn them against responding with an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

"You have 30 seconds left," indicated (moderator Madeleine) Poulin.

"I'll try to be brief. What I recommend is that, since there are 277 religions in the world and that all religions preach love, I recommend that the human being become part of the world's heritage. If we all got naked, we'd all be humans, and after that we'd put our clothes back on and get on with things, life is beautiful."

Simple, really, but it took somebody to think of it.

We finally reached Montreal, the multicultural metropolis, the haunt of many exotic animals. We thought we'd seen everything, and yet ...

At the Palais des Congr s, a man took the escalator up to the fifth floor, a suitcase in hand. Inside was a mouse mask and a poster; the first was meant to draw people's attention, the second was to illustrate a computerized system the man had dreamed up to help people learn how to conjugate verbs. He was burning to explain to journalists how his "revolutionary" technology worked. An immigrant from the Maghreb, out of work, he kept close to wherever the cameras were to make sure he'd be seen. It worked: the next day his photo would run in The Gazette, showing him in the background with his two big mouse ears, behind two bearded Sikhs who were the subject of the picture. When it comes to diversity, you don't get much better than that.

But his 15 minutes of fame were coming to a quick end.

A security guard approached him and asked him to accompany him down to the lobby. Before leaving the scene, the guard switched on his walkie-talkie and advised his colleagues downstairs: "This is the supervisor. I've intercepted Mouse Man."

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