

Chapter 7

The Knife-Throwers: "I'm not racist, but ..."

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How many times did we hear that figure of speech? Indeed, there was no shortage of racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic comments in all the towns and cities visited by the Bouchard-Taylor commission - comments that a great number of Quebecers weren't shy to adopt as their own.

These harsh-sounding voices represented a serious strategical problem for the commissioners, who usually chose to ignore them or simply stopped listening after the "but ..."

Sometimes, they exercised their right as masters of ceremony to interrupt the speakers and call them to order. Unfortunately, their way of managing such outbursts was inconsistent.

Many racist comments went unchallenged. Sometimes, the commissioners waited until they were in a new town before reacting to objectionable statements; sometimes they didn't bring them up again at all. They ignored flagrantly anti-Semitic comments in St. Jérôme, only to denounce the same kinds of statements in Quebec City. Why? They cut the microphone of a man who spoke out against Muslims in Sept-Îles, but gave another man all the time in the world to spout Islamophobia in Trois-Rivières. Why? Were the commissioners getting contradictory advice from their own committee of experts or from the government?

Let's not forget that their performance was being evaluated daily not only by journalists, but by bureaucrats of Quebec's immigration and education departments. In the post-mortems with them between cities, were the commissioners being told how to manage the public to keep things from getting out of hand? We often asked ourselves the question.

Convinced of the fundamental importance of freedom of the press and of public opinion, we naturally were against censoring what people said. We believed in the necessity of publishing the good with the bad, of allowing the public to let itself be heard. But we also saw the hurt that hostile comments caused to the victims, as well as the harm being done to Quebec's image in the rest of Canada.

The commissioners should have made clear that racist, hateful and otherwise unacceptable remarks would not be tolerated, and they should have denounced them systematically and removed the microphone from anyone who came to preach hate toward other people, regardless of their religion or origins.

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