

## René Lévesque portrays New Carlisle, home of his childhood, as Rhodesia

By William Johnson

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Reflecting in April 1966 on his childhood in the remote Gaspé Peninsula town of New Carlisle, far from glittering Quebec City or cosmopolitan Montréal, René Lévesque, then a minister in Jean Lesage's outgoing just defeated Liberal government, had a sudden epiphany, a revelation that would thereafter inspire his political career as a separatist leader. He discovered, or so he tells us, that New Carlisle, in its existential reality, as he had experienced it as a child – but only understood many years later – conveyed the essential truth that characterized the fate of French Canadians in Quebec and in all of Canada, namely, that they were colonized. New Carlisle was just like Southern Rhodesia. Moreover, the Province of Quebec, like New Carlisle, was just like Rhodesia. English speakers, whether in New Carlisle, in Quebec or in all of Canada, treated French Canadians like the white minority of Rhodesia treated its suppressed and oppressed black majority.

That same year, 1966, was when the United Nations imposed punitive sanctions on what was then called Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), for violation of human rights. Rhodesia was the first country to be so punished by the UN, because there a small white minority ruled, mercilessly repressing the black majority. For René Lévesque, an expert on world affairs after his many years as a Radio-Canada reporter on international affairs, Rhodesia provided the best mirror available for understanding New Carlisle and all of Quebec: English speakers in Canada exploited French Canadians and deprived them of their rights. French Canadians were treated just like black Rhodesians!

In the April 1966 issue of *Châtelaine*, the French language monthly magazine, journalist Hélène Pilote published an adulatory portrait of Lévesque<sup>1</sup>. As Lévesque reminisced with his interviewer about his childhood, he contrasted his carefree early days in New Carlisle with his eventual discovery of the true tragic status of French Canadians in New Carlisle: their situation mirrored in miniature the tragic status of all French Canadians in Quebec and in Canada. They were *colonisés* just as was the black majority in Rhodesia in the 1960s, under the thumb of an imperialist white ruling minority. Here are his words, translated by me into English:

Every morning, I passed in front of the English high school. It was a beautiful big modern school that seemed to me all the bigger because I was small (he reminisced.) When I go back there, things regain their true proportions; but, to tell you the truth, that high school has become bigger and bigger for me as the years went by. When I reflect on it today, I have to recognize that it was the very symbol of all our coexistence with the *Anglais*. New Carlisle had been populated by a handful of Loyalists who had settled there and they kept control of all powers. They were not wicked. They treated the French Canadians as the white Rhodesians treat their blacks. They don't hurt them, but they hold all the money, and so the beautiful villas and the good schools. I don't have

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Pilote, « René Lévesque engage le dialogue avec les femmes du Québec, » *Châtelaine*, avril 1966, pp. 48, 49, 92, 94, 96.

precise statistics, but I know for sure that the standard of living of the English-Canadians is higher in Quebec than in any other province. To be behind in education, for a people, is what is most difficult to overcome. The beautiful big English high school that took in students until grade eleven was then followed by McGill University. My French-Canadian backwoods school, with a single teacher for four or five classes, lead nowhere, it's that simple.

Hélène Pilote summarized in her own words what Lévesque meant when he spoke of New Carlisle as Rhodesia:

Even though he did not suffer from poverty during his childhood, he was profoundly marked by the fact of living drowned in an English-speaking community, that was rich and indifferent. "We were their aboriginals", he asserted, in the sincere, direct, and, if you will, insolent language that is his trademark. Too intelligent to become the extreme right-wing nationalist that certain anglophones see in him, he is nevertheless the ardent propagandist of the slogan: « Maîtres chez nous ».

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That René Lévesque often used the term *Rhodésiens* to describe rich and powerful English speakers is well known. But he went beyond merely characterizing some individuals and groups as "Rhodesians." For him, that expression best summarized the entire relationship between English speakers and French speakers in New Carlisle – and ultimately in Quebec and all of Canada. The grave implications of that characterization have never received the serious scrutiny that they deserve. When he spoke that way, he was taken merely as being provocative, as thumbing his nose at arrogant executives of Noranda Mines or at "Westmount Rhodesians." But Lévesque's use of the expression carried, in fact, a powerful ideological message of great political importance. With that single word, Lévesque conferred on Quebec the same status that had been experienced by the colonies that had recently gained their independence from France, like Vietnam, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. It implied that Quebec, because it was declared a colony just as they had been, now had the same right they had exercised to declare itself sovereign, and so independent from Canada. Secession was implicitly declared to be French Quebec's unconditional right.

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There was a fundamental dishonesty in René Lévesque's equation of New Carlisle with Rhodesia. New Carlisle was not a self-governing colony as Rhodesia was then. It was subject to the laws of Canada and, significantly, to the laws adopted by the Province of Quebec where French speakers constituted the immense majority of the population and also of the members of the Quebec Legislature. Since 1897, every premier has been a French speaker<sup>2</sup>. Under both

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<sup>2</sup> Three Quebec premiers were of the same family, of Irish origin: Daniel Johnson Sr., his son Pierre Marc Johnson and another son, Daniel Johnson Jr. But for all three, their main spoken language was French rather than English.

Canadian and Quebec jurisdictions, equality before the law has been a vested principle, the very opposite of what prevailed in Rhodesia.

It was very misleading to say what Lévesque said: “New Carlisle had been populated by a handful of Loyalists and they controlled everything. They were not unkind. They treated the French Canadians as the white Rhodesians treated their black people.” The Loyalists did not, in fact, “control everything.” They did not control the sphere of the Catholic religion or of French education, very important sectors in the New Carlisle of the 1920s and the 1930s.

Moreover, New Carlisle was not founded, as was Southern Rhodesia, by foreign settlers whose ancestors had invaded as conquerors and set up a distinct state marked by racial segregation and inequality before the law. The Loyalists who settled New Carlisle and the surrounding region were refugees from the American Revolutionary War. They were allotted by Governor Haldimand virgin land to clear and settle.

Rhodesia, by contrast, was named, arrogantly, after Cecil Rhodes, the British expatriate imperialist who went from Britain to the Cape Colony in southern Africa to farm, soon made a fortune in diamond mining and then served as prime minister of Britain’s Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896. It was Rhodes who engineered the imperialist take-over of the territory that would be named Rhodesia, by establishing there an enterprise that he had founded, the British South Africa Company. The territory would soon have a capital imposed on it called *Salisbury*, named after Lord Salisbury, Britain’s Prime Minister in 1880, when Salisbury was founded originally as a fort.<sup>3</sup> That was pure arrogant imperialist presumption. The imperialists simply invaded under the cover of a treaty that Rhodes had imposed on a local king by intimidation. They then overruled the institutions of the local population to impose their own.

The founding of what would become Rhodesia was a story of military pressure, invasion, subjugation, appropriation. The territory had been occupied mostly by the Ndebele Nation, ruled by King Lobengula. The British South Africa Company forced the king to sign a treaty in 1889 allowing it to explore for minerals. The white pioneer settlers then moved in and simply took over. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* summarizes the violent takeover:

In 1890 a pioneer column set out from Bechuanaland and reached the site of the future capital of Rhodesia without incident on September 12. There the new arrivals settled and began to lay claim to prospecting rights. The Ndebele resented this European invasion, and in 1893 they took up arms, being defeated only after months of strenuous fighting. Lobengula, [King] Mzilikazi’s son and successor, fled, and the company assumed administrative control of Matabeleland. [...] Serious trouble broke out in 1893, when Lobengula tried to reassert his control over Mashonaland. A short, sharp war ended in the total defeat and death of Lobengula. In 1895, [...] the company-

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<sup>3</sup> The information presented here on Rhodesia, which changed its name to Zimbabwe in 1979, is derived from the Encyclopedia Britannica online, under the entry “Zimbabwe” at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/657149/Zimbabwe>. It was accessed on November 5, 2014.

administered territories, which had previously been loosely known as Zambesia, were formally named Rhodesia by proclamation. In 1896 the Ndebele rose again. Returning from London, Rhodes met with the Ndebele chiefs and persuaded them to make peace. The Shona had at first accepted the Europeans, but they too became rebellious, and the whole country was not pacified until 1897.

What was there in the history of New Carlisle that was in any way similar to the invasive, imperialist takeover that was central to the history of Rhodesia? Lévesque could only point to the big English high school, despite the fact that education was entirely under the jurisdiction of the Province of Quebec.

In 1962, the United Nations General Assembly admitted to UN membership the former colonies of Rwanda, Burundi, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, the Popular Republic of Algeria and Uganda. And it also passed the following resolution on what was then called Southern Rhodesia:<sup>4</sup>

The General Assembly Requests the Administering Authority:

- (a) To undertake urgently the convening of a constitutional conference, in which there shall be full participation of representatives of all political parties, for the purpose of formulating a constitution for Southern Rhodesia, in place of the Constitution of 6 December 1961, which would ensure the rights of the majority of the people, on the basis of "one man, one vote," in conformity with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples, embodied in General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV);
- (b) To take immediate steps to restore all rights of the non-European population and remove all restraints and restrictions in law and in practice on the exercise of the freedom of political activity including all laws, ordinances and regulations which directly or indirectly sanction any policy or practice based on racial discrimination;
- (c) To grant amnesty to, and ensure the immediate release of, all political prisoners.

The ruling white minority then did exactly the opposite of what the UN demanded. Elections were held in December of 1962 under the same racially discriminatory law and it brought to power an even more radically racist party, the Rhodesian Front, on a platform of retaining white dominance and obtaining independence from Britain. When Britain refused to endorse independence under terms of such injustice for the black majority, Rhodesia's Prime Minister Ian Smith issued a unilateral declaration of independence on November 11, 1965. Rhodesia would then remain an outlaw state for the next 15 years. Britain and other countries imposed sanctions. The UN Security Council imposed mandatory economic sanctions on Rhodesia in 1966 – the first country ever to be so punished by the UN – and further expanded the sanctions in 1968.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Resolution 1747 (XVI). 1121st plenary meeting, June 28, 1962.

<sup>5</sup> After years of civil war, the United Kingdom retook control of Southern Rhodesia in 1980, democratic elections were held, and the world recognized the black majority government on April 18, 1980. The country was renamed Zimbabwe, and in 1982 Salisbury was renamed Harare.

Is this the model that can reasonably be applied to New Carlisle, or to all of Quebec within Canada? In contrast, here is how Pierre Godin, Lévesque's principal biographer, describes the settlement of New Carlisle:

At the time when Dominique Lévesque settled in New Carlisle, in the early 1920s, the town had slightly less than 1,000 inhabitants, with about one-third being Francophone. These Francophones, who mostly came from the nearby villages of Bonaventure and Paspébiac, constituted a recent demographic addition to the original Anglophone settlement.<sup>6</sup>

So, the English speakers were there first (though after the aboriginals), the French speakers came later – exactly the opposite of Rhodesia. Here is how Godin describes the foundation of New Carlisle:

In 1783, Governor Haldimand sent loyalist Captain Justus Sherwood to the Baie des Chaleurs. His mission was to explore the north shore aboard the brig *St. Peter*. The expedition proved conclusive beyond expectations: the land was fertile, the climate as mild as was nowhere to be found on the north shore of the Gaspé Peninsula; the prospects for fishing and commerce were excellent. The sailor even estimated that the coastline could accommodate more than 1,500 Loyalist families.

What Sherwood had seen left him marvelling. He was so charmed by the sandy beaches and the red cliffs of the bay that, on his return, he requested land for himself at Paspébiac, a fishing center not far from the proposed settlement. The colonization by the Loyalists really began on June 9, 1784. On that day, 315 colonists, mostly drawn from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, set out from Yamachiche for their Gaspesian promised land, on board eight small ships that made landing two weeks later at Paspébiac.

The governor showed a boundless generosity towards his new subjects who spoke the language of His Majesty: free land, ploughing equipment and even some household items. In August, the government's agent, Félix O'Hara, carried out a survey of the site of a little town baptized New Carlisle and divided it into 150 lots to be farmed and 240 lots for housing. Then the distribution of the properties began by drawing lots.<sup>7</sup>

So, the founders of New Carlisle were refugees from the American Revolution, not imperialists setting up their fort in occupied territory against the will of the original people. The Loyalists did not displace French Canadians but were resettled on virgin land where there had been no European settlement and where the plan for a new village was laid out from scratch. So far, New Carlisle's history began as totally opposite to the forceful intrusion of Rhodes's British South Africa Company into an African kingdom.

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<sup>6</sup> Godin, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Godin, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

Rhodesia would go through several changes of name and territory. What remained constant was the total dominance by the white minority, and the absence of rights recognized for the black majority, even as internal self-government was obtained from Britain by the colony in 1923. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* explained:

Immediately after World War I, the pressure for self-government was resumed, and a royal commission was appointed to consider the future of the territory. As a result of the commission's report, a referendum of the electors among the 34,000 Europeans in the country was held in 1922; the choice was between entry into the Union of South Africa as its fifth province, and full internal self-government. In spite of the offer of generous terms by the Union's prime minister, General Jan C. Smuts, a [white] majority voted for self-government. On September 12, 1923, Southern Rhodesia was annexed to the Crown and became a self-governing colony. The British government retained control of external affairs and a final veto in respect to legislation directly affecting Africans.

Following the Second World War, the single most important world-wide movement was the decolonization of Asia and Africa. India and Pakistan became independent in 1947, Ghana in 1957. France, a laggard, recognized the independence of Algeria in 1962, following a referendum there where 99.7 percent voted to separate from France, and the voter turnout was 91.9 per cent. But the white population of Rhodesia remained obdurate throughout in resisting the world-wide trend towards decolonization.

During the 1960s, Rhodesia attracted the condemnation of the world. An electoral law adopted in 1957 recognized two classes of voters: the "A roll" was restricted to the white population, the "B roll" admitted a small proportion of the black population to the privilege of voting. As black political parties sprang up demanding equal voting rights, they were successively banned by laws voted by the white majority of elected members. Guerrilla movements sprang up and were repressed by military force, with the connivance of the apartheid government of the Union of South Africa. Many blacks were tortured and killed to maintain white supremacy.

Lévesque would recurrently return to his supposed insight, his key revelation for grasping the hidden reality of New Carlisle, and so of Quebec within Canada. Rhodesians! This scenario was totally fraudulent, but it would inspire his developing vision as a politician. For Lévesque, the word "Rhodésien," as he applied it to New Carlisle, was the logical justification for the words, "souveraineté-association," which he would eventually propose as the solution to the fundamental existential problem of Quebec as he had defined it. And few people would challenge his malicious and incongruent depiction of Quebec's essential reality within the Canadian federation. Journalists and professors, notably, were all too willing to accept his explanation of what caused French Quebec's recognized backwardness before the Quiet Revolution.

René grew up speaking English as well as French. So, he must have had pals with whom he spoke English. Who were his best friends in New Carlisle? Strangely, he does not name or

describe a single one. The reason is obvious: to name English-speaking pals would have undercut his thesis of New Carlisle as Rhodesia. He portrayed instead total enmity between the young of the two linguistic communities. At the same time, he pretended to have no resentment against the persecuting Anglos: “They were not unkind,” he said with consummate hypocrisy, when his whole thesis was designed to portray *les Anglais* in general as the most heartless persecutors on the face of the earth. His protestations earned him the accolades as a moderate, not at all an extremist, someone who would never violate the rights of Quebec’s English-speaking minority.

Lévesque would be the subject of another lengthy portrait in print in 1969, this time drawn by journalist Jacques Guay, who asked Lévesque to retrace the trajectory that led him to found the separatist Parti Québécois. In that interview, as in many others, Lévesque insisted that he had no hard feelings towards *les Anglais*. Never mind that they oppressed French Canadians; he rose above all resentment. At the same time, he did portray French-English relations during his childhood in New Carlisle as one perpetual state of war. Here is a translation of part of that interview:

I learnt English without even noticing. That was in New Carlisle, a bastion of Loyalists whose ancestors had fled the American Revolution to remain faithful to the British Crown. It was a permanent adventure between gangs of little French Canadians and little *Anglais*. We pounded each other. They called us pea soups and we – don’t ask me why – called them crawfish. It was all very folkloric, and I didn’t nurse any resentment towards people speaking English. I thought that was normal. It was all just the way things were. Sometimes my father, who was a lawyer, had to accompany me all the way to school, carrying a cane, to get me past the corner where *les Anglais* were waiting for me. In every sport there was the *Canadiens’s* team and the team of the *Anglais*, and at every game we would throw stones at each other.<sup>8</sup>

René found it normal that his father had to guard him all the way to school, carrying a cane, to protect his son from being beaten up by *les Anglais*? That it could have seemed *normal*, as *just the way things were*, constituted a terrible judgment on the people of New Carlisle where two-thirds of the population were English-speaking and so the minority of French Canadians were more vulnerable. Lévesque’s description of the “normal” would send a message to the Québécois from truly normal Quebec neighborhoods where they did not need a guardian with a stick to get safely to school. The message was that *les Anglais* were bullies, oppressors, constant threats. But Lévesque claimed, nevertheless, that he bore no resentment. That was just the way things were.

René Lévesque’s biographers all picked up credulously on the theme of New Carlisle as a miniature Rhodesia. Historian Jean Provencher published in 1973 an admiring 270-page portrait

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Guay, « Comment René Lévesque est devenu indépendantiste, » *Le Magazine Maclean*, février 1969, volume. 9 #02, p. 24-26. This quotation is from page 25.

titled *René Lévesque: Portrait d'un Québécois*.<sup>9</sup> His description of New Carlisle is mainly established by quoting Lévesque's own words about his home town, including his comparison between the one-room schoolhouse for French Canadian and Irish Catholic children that led nowhere and the English-language high school that led to McGill University. Provencher quoted, notably, this sentence about the Loyalists: "They treated the French Canadians as the white Rhodesians treated their black people."<sup>10</sup>

Provencher never for a moment questioned the accuracy of comparing New Carlisle to Rhodesia, where there was one law for white people and another law without voting rights for most black people. He went on: "At one point everyone got so riled up that Mr. Lévesque had to accompany his son, like a bodyguard, past that dangerous corner. 'That was needed' said the son, 'because otherwise I never could have made it to school and we would have got lost in an unbelievable underground warfare.'"<sup>11</sup>

His next biographer, journalist and ardent separatist Alain Pontaut, published his 237-page hagiography in 1983, less than two years before the Premier was forced by his cabinet to resign. Pontaut offered an even darker picture of New Carlisle than Lévesque's. He recognized that René had not experienced the worst of it.

From Gaspé to Percé, from Grande-Rivière to Paspébiac, the Robin [company] was everywhere, treating as the Rhodesians treated their negroes, a population that did not even speak English and who were subject to a single requirement: that they enrich their master and keep their stinking destitution at a respectful distance [...]  
At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Baie des Chaleurs did not belong to its first white inhabitants but to Robin, Jones and Whitman Ltd.<sup>12</sup>

Pontaut was obviously unaware that the first white inhabitants of the Baie des Chaleurs were American refugees. He did recognize, though, that young René did learn English naturally in the majority English environment of New Carlisle. And the biographer commented:

This was another privilege, and almost priceless when one thinks of so many farmers' sons forced to come to Montreal and to be affronted, when they could not speak a word of English, by foremen inclined to utter "Speak White!", and when one thinks of all those, men and women, who could not work in their own language. René Lévesque would come to participate in this alienation of his national community, not by his own experience, but by his intelligence.<sup>13</sup>

Pontaut was here repeating the libel popularized by author Michelle Lalonde in a poem by that title, "Speak White," written in 1968. It presents English-speaking bosses all over the world as

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<sup>9</sup> Montréal, Éditions La Presse, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Pontaut, *René Lévesque ou « l'idéalisme pratique, »* Montréal, Leméac, 1983, p. 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

shouting “speak white” to their helpless French-speaking employees. The poem became a sensation, recited at patriotic meetings, often anthologized, made into a movie. The expression has become part of conventional wisdom, cited constantly as the typical way that English Quebecers used to speak contemptuously to their French-speaking fellow citizens. In all my life, I never heard it uttered even once by an English speaker (but often by defiant French speakers). Journalist Lysiane Gagnon, who grew up in an English-speaking part of Montreal, has written in *La Presse* that she never heard the expression spoken. I am not aware of a single authenticated case of an English-speaker spitting “speak white!” to a French speaker. The two words don’t even make sense together in English, since white is a colour, not a language. But it has become a cardinal myth embedded in the culture of French Quebec, even though there is no convincing evidence that it was ever a practice. (See: <http://vision.williamjohnson-quebec.ca/the-canadian-myth-of-speak-white/>)

In explaining to journalist Jacques Guay why he became a separatist, Lévesque insisted that it had nothing to do with anglophobia, but simply with the fact that French Canadians were treated by English-speaking Canadians the way black Rhodesians were treated by the white dominant minority. If things continued in Quebec as they were at present, he feared, French Canadians would simply disappear.

I’d like to point out that I never felt hostile towards the English population. But, later on, when I began to ask questions, I had the feeling of having lived during my childhood in a kind of laboratory where you could find in miniature the kind of stupid control that Quebec lives under. We French Canadians in New Carlisle were Rhodesians, colonized people. [...]

Because we continue on in Confederation, we will disappear. If we don’t convey to the young who are graduating from university that what is being built in Quebec will be built by them, there will be one awful emigration. For example, my son, who is studying in law, wants to study business administration at Harvard. The young people of this generation leave to study in the United States or in Europe. If our Rhodesia continues, they will clear out for good.<sup>14</sup>

Lévesque’s principal biographer, Pierre Godin, clearly swallowed his subject’s description of what life was literally like in New Carlisle. Godin wrote:

René Lévesque would say later: “We French Canadians in New Carlisle were colonized. In this village, a small number of *Anglais* controlled everything, the CN railway, the bank, the general store... We were their aboriginals.”

As if to give the lie to that judgement, today’s visitor to New Carlisle, arriving by water, can’t miss there on the right a large sign proudly proclaiming harmony in both languages: “New Carlisle où vivre en harmonie – *Living together in harmony.*” This

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Guay, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

slogan testifies to the bi-ethnic past of the town, but also tries to rebuke down the ages its most famous son who repeated all his life that, in New Carlisle, P.Q., the *Anglais* of his day treated the French as their white negroes.<sup>15</sup>

Godin clearly accepted as fact Lévesque's nasty portrait of New Carlisle. Godin wrote: "In this New Carlisle of *speaking white young René*, English is the required passport to move around the town and to make oneself understood. And so René Lévesque very quickly became bilingual, an advantage that would serve him well all his life even though, in New Carlisle, his compulsory bilingualism amounted to little more than a kind of slang in both languages."<sup>16</sup>

René spoke slang? Lévesque did say so. He was thereby confirming a common conviction among nationalists that to be much exposed to English as a child would inevitably stunt one's verbal and intellectual development. So how could it be otherwise in New Carlisle? Lévesque asserted in his memoirs: "I wasn't really bilingual. I spoke the most terrible brand of *franglais*."<sup>17</sup> Still, mysteriously, when René was sent at age 11 to study at the Petit Séminaire de Gaspé, where almost all the students had grown up in a totally French environment, he emerged at the top of his class, an outstanding student, particularly in French as a subject. In his biography, Pierre Godin has many passages about René's prowess as a student. For example:

In his second year, the phoenix from New Carlisle carried off again the overall first prize, worth \$2.50 in gold. He also won nine first prizes, including the prize for algebra. [...] He was so obviously gifted that his teachers liked to put him to the test by assigning him homework that would be far too advanced for the others, such as translating whole pages of Virgil. His translations, polished off in no time flat, were so good that the corrections suggested by his teachers seemed suddenly like the homework of poor students.<sup>18</sup>

So, Godin first accepted that, in New Carlisle, René spoke only slang in two languages. But then, without a qualm or an explanation, he becomes lyrical over René's prowess in written French at school. When, in the fall of 1938, René transferred from Gaspé to Quebec City's Collège Saint-Charles-Garnier, also staffed by the Jesuits, the boy from the boondocks absolutely shocked expectations by again scoring at the top of his class, outperforming all his classmates who had grown up in the thoroughly francophone capital city of Québec. Again Godin testifies:

At Garnier, René Lévesque maintained in the class of *Rhétorique*<sup>19</sup> the same level of performance. [...] He easily outclassed the former stars of the college, Boucher, Filiatreault and Roy. [...] That year, René Lévesque distinguished himself in the two areas

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<sup>15</sup> Godin, Pierre, *René Lévesque* Vol. 1, *Un enfant du siècle : 1922-1960*, Montréal : Éditions du Boréal, 1994, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> René Lévesque, *Memoirs*, Translated by Philip Stratford, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Godin, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> In the eight-year course of the *cours classique*, the four last years were named respectively *Belles-Lettres*, *Rhétorique*, *Philosophie I* and *Philosophie II*.

where he excelled at Gaspé: writing and speech. But while his teacher in *Belles-Lettres* [at the Séminaire de Gaspé] had predicted that his career would be that of a writer, his teacher of Rhétorique saw in him rather a future politician.<sup>20</sup>

Both teachers proved right in their predictions. René's fluent bilingualism coupled with his eloquence in speaking and writing would provide him with the passport to a brilliant career.

Lévesque, as an adult, chose to have it both ways. Obviously, to grow up French-speaking in New Carlisle was disastrous. Godin, the faithful biographer, never saw any incongruity in Lévesque's narrative of oppression. He simply believed what Lévesque told him. His cover story was that it was René's father who, despite all the oppressions of the milieu, taught him to read widely and to cultivate his mind in both French and English. Maybe.

But, as a final comment, be it noted that even if we take literally every detail of his description of the town, it still corresponds not at all to the murderous situation prevailing in Rhodesia. He did not describe a single French speaker tortured or assassinated, not a single murderous raid on a group of French-speaking protesters. Lévesque's New Carlisle would have seemed like the Garden of Eden to the black people of Southern Rhodesia.

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René Lévesque's family did not live in poverty in New Carlisle. His father, Dominique Lévesque, a lawyer, drove a convertible Studebaker and his young family always had a live-in maid or governess. Pierre Godin noted :

The second floor contained the bedroom of the parents, of the children and of the maid. Indeed, there was always a governess in the home of Lévesque the lawyer. One of them would become the mother of the world-renowned actress Geneviève Bujold, with whom René Lévesque would have a love affair many years later.<sup>21</sup>

So, what exactly did Lévesque mean when he spoke of "nous" being colonized, of "nous" being treated as aboriginals or Rhodesians? It is a grievous charge against the English-speaking people of New Carlisle and of Quebec as a whole even if Lévesque insisted he had no resentment. Today, almost half a century later, it is easy to miss the full venom of that comparison. Yet it summarized his vision and his preaching about the basic reality of his country, and he acted with great efficacy in accordance with that view in his attempt to change it.

The single tangible piece of evidence that he offered was the local English high school, so advantageous compared to the French language available educational opportunities. Lévesque's observation about the deleterious effect of a bad education system was accurate: "A lower standard of education, for a people, is what is hardest to make up." But how could

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<sup>20</sup> Godin, *op. cit.*, pp. 96 and 97.

<sup>21</sup> Godin, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

that be charged against *les Anglais*? In 1867, a federation was chosen for Canada rather than a unitary state precisely to give the French-speaking majority of Quebec control over such a sensitive domain as education. When the Province of Quebec came into existence, its first government included a ministry of education. The first premier, Pierre-Joseph-Olivier Chauveau, had been superintendent of education for Lower Canada for the previous 12 years. In 1867 he was sworn in as both prime minister and minister of education. But in 1875, a new premier, the *ultramontain* Catholic Conservative Charles-Eugène Boucher de Boucherville, passed a law abolishing the existing *Ministère de l'instruction publique*. This conformed with the teaching of the Church at the time that opposed any state control over education.

In 1864, the same year that our Fathers of Confederation met in Charlottetown and Quebec City to outline a new country, Pope Pius IX issued on December 8 an encyclical letter titled "Syllabus of Modern Errors" that was to have a vast influence on education and society in Quebec. Opposed to the French Revolution and to the increasing official secularization of France, as well as to the spread of a secular nationalism in the papal states of Italy, the Pope denounced as an "error," and contrary to the true faith, the doctrine promoting the separation of church and state and the secularization of education. Education must be Catholic and controlled by the Church, the Pope insisted. At paragraph 47, the encyclical denounced as error the following formulation:

The best theory of civil society requires that popular schools be open to children of every class of the people, and, generally, all public institutes intended for instruction in letters and philosophical sciences and for carrying on the education of youth, should be freed from all ecclesiastical authority, control and interference, and should be fully subjected to the civil and political power at the pleasure of the rulers, and according to the standard of the prevalent opinions of the age.

This was the religious stricture that inspired Premier Boucher de Boucherville to abolish the ministry of education and to remove the government from its responsibility over public education. It placed Catholic education, French and English, entirely in the hands of the Catholic bishops. Thenceforth, for nearly a century, the church in Quebec, ultra conservative, opposed compulsory schooling and favoured a privately-run secondary school education that included six years of classical Latin and five years of classical Greek, as well as two years concentrating on medieval Thomistic philosophy. This "classical education," as it was called, was based originally on the *Ratio Atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Iesu*, a curriculum instituted by the Jesuits in 1599, and it was required in Quebec as a prerequisite to enroll in a French-language university. It ensured a rich annual crop of candidates for the Catholic priesthood, as Latin was then the common language of the Catholic Church. Its most solemn ceremonies, such as mass and sacraments such as baptism as well as absolution in the confessional were still conducted in Latin. But the practical appeal of concentrating on two dead languages and on medieval philosophy was less apparent to uneducated parents and those now coming off the farm.

The most telling test of René Lévesque's intellectual dishonesty when he equated New Carlisle and Rhodesia was his treatment of the man who was both New Carlisle's and the entire Gaspé

peninsula's richest, most prominent and most powerful citizen, John Hall Kelly. If New Carlisle was like Rhodesia, then Kelly must have demonstrated the white Rhodesian mentality. But Kelly was of Irish origin, not English, Roman Catholic, not Protestant, educated as a boarder in French language institutions run by religious congregations and priests and so was totally bilingual and bicultural. He had been married to a French-speaking woman from Quebec City, was the top politician in the entire Gaspé Peninsula for most of his 35 years in the Quebec Legislature and was a major benefactor who helped found the Petit Séminaire de Gaspé where René spent years as a boarder. The inevitable conclusion: Kelly was the very opposite of a white Rhodesian and Lévesque is exposed as a shameless demagogue.

Kelly was a very rich entrepreneur as well as a politician. The Quebec National Assembly, where he served as both an elected member, minister and member of the former upper chamber, carries a biographical notice of Kelly which lists the names of the companies of which he was president: "New Richmond Mining Co., North American Mining Co., Gaspé Mines, Cascapédia Mines et Paspébiac Mines." It also notes that, in 1905, he was the founder and president of Bonaventure Telephone Company, the firm that brought the telephone to the Gaspé Peninsula for the first time.

Kelly ran a law firm in New Carlisle and it was Kelly who invited René Lévesque's father, Dominique Lévesque, a French Canadian, to move to New Carlisle, right after the latter's 1920 marriage to René's mother, Diane Dionne, to join his law firm. Was that Rhodesian? Dominique Lévesque would become Kelly's associate in the latter's law firm, but some years later Dominique left the firm to set up his own successful legal practice.

In his memoirs, Lévesque had not one good word to say about Kelly. He insinuated that Kelly had been a dishonest scoundrel without providing a single piece of evidence. But, by offering only this caricature of Kelly, Lévesque was spared from having to give a true portrait of the man and of New Carlisle:

My father was a young lawyer who, when the Spanish influenza came within a whisper of carrying him off, had to resign himself to a rural practice. As a student at the beginning of the century he was one of those young Liberals who thought Laurier was a god, and he had dreamed of leading an active political life. But since his health didn't permit him the rough and tumble of politics, he had ended up in this tiny county seat where for some years he was the assistant of an older colleague who, at least by local standards, was an important businessman who looked down on everyone from the heights of his ugly little château on the edge of town. He was an Irishman, Kelly by name, and I was threatened with his Christian name, John, because he had been asked to be my godfather. Only my mother's intervention saved me from the ignominy of being called "Ti-John" Lévesque for the rest of my days. Years later I was doubly glad to have escaped when my father brought the association to an end, sick of shady dealings whose bad smells emanated from every drawer, and opened his own office where he at last knew the respect and success he deserved. None of this, however, prevented the

godfather from becoming “Sir John” and being named High Commissioner to Ireland, where he ended his life in an odour of sanctity.<sup>22</sup>

This sinister innuendo served one purpose: instead of having to describe Kelly as the total Francophile that he was, which would have contradicted his portrait of New Carlisle as Rhodesia, Lévesque got away with presenting nothing but a venomous caricature of the man who was by far the most significant face of New Carlisle.

Lévesque dripped sarcasm when he noted that Kelly was eventually knighted, acquiring the title of “Sir.” He portrayed Kelly as a nouveau-riche who looked down his nose on everyone from the distant height of his “ugly little château.” Kelly, New Carlisle’s most influential citizen by far, had to be assumed to be the very model of the racist Rhodesian, since Lévesque described not a single other adult Rhodesian.

The real Kelly, as we shall presently see, was, in fact, the most powerful, the most prominent, the most respected figure, not only in New Carlisle, but in the entire Gaspé peninsula. He was respected and even loved by French speakers as well as English speakers. Otherwise, he could never have remained the leading Liberal politician in the Gaspé for three and a half decades.

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Of his own contemporaries in New Carlisle, Lévesque wrote: “This was the town of less than a thousand souls where, involuntarily, I spent my first years. It thought of itself as the bellybutton of the world and was very, very WASP, the microcosm of a blissfully dominant minority.”<sup>23</sup> By saying that “involuntarily,” he spent his first years there, he accentuates his contempt for the place.

Lévesque was far from telling the whole story. The relevant facts he omitted would have conveyed a very different impression of Kelly and so of New Carlisle. Why did René’s parents ask Kelly to stand as godfather to their son? Why did Kelly accept, if he was a true Rhodesian? Rhodesian whites did not stand as godfathers to Rhodesian blacks. Lévesque fails to mention in his memoirs the gift that Kelly gave to commemorate René’s baptismal ceremony. Godin wrote: “His first substantial gift was given him by his godfather John Hall Kelly, the associate of his father. It was a handsome rattan baby carriage to wheel him about.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, it was almost certainly not a coincidence that Dominique Lévesque, then a 31-year-old lawyer practising in Rivière-du-Loup, received the invitation to join Kelly in New Carlisle. Kelly’s wife since 1904, the mother of his children, had died in 1917. She was a *pure laine* French Canadian named Marie-Adèle Dionne, daughter of a notary from Quebec City. Marie-

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<sup>22</sup> René Lévesque, *Memoirs*. Translated by Philip Stratford, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1986, 53-54. Italics added.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> René Lévesque Vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Adèle Dionne was also a distant relative of René's own mother, Diane Dionne.<sup>25</sup> Did Rhodesian white males marry Rhodesian black women?

Kelly himself was the polar opposite of the ugly Anglo suggested by Lévesque. He was born in 1879 in Saint-Godefroi on the Baie des Chaleurs. His father was a farmer. He was sent west for secondary school as a boarder at the Collège de Lévis to study commerce with les Frères des écoles chrétiennes. Then he transferred to New Brunswick where he studied at the first Acadian college founded in the Maritime provinces, the Collège Saint-Joseph at Memramcook, which later merged with other institutions to form the Université de Moncton. After obtaining his bachelor of arts degree there, he studied law at Université Laval, obtaining his law degree *magna cum laude* in 1902. Two years later, in 1904, he was elected at the age of 25 to Quebec's Legislative Assembly to represent the riding of Bonaventure.

Clearly, Kelly never could have won election in this majority French riding had he been seen as an *étranger*, or as the distant, contemptuous businessman "who looked down on everyone from the heights of his ugly little château on the edge of town." Kelly was then re-elected twice more, in 1908 and 1912, but in 1914 he resigned his seat to be appointed to the former upper chamber, the Conseil législatif, a position he held until 1939, when he was named as Canada's first ambassador to Ireland. He died there in 1941.

During his political career, Kelly had become the *éminence grise* and chief organizer for the Quebec Liberal Party for the entire Gaspé region. He could not have achieved that status had he not identified himself closely with the French-speaking majority. A white Rhodesian could never have represented Bonaventure County as he did at the legislature, in both the lower and upper house, from 1904 to 1939, for a combined 35 years. He had to have the common touch of a lifelong politician who was also a most successful entrepreneur.

Was Lévesque fair in his portrayal of Kelly as a remote snob and a swindler? History provides an entirely different appraisal. In 1993, Kelly's remains were transferred from Ireland to be reburied in New Carlisle. On that occasion, the president of the Gaspé historical society, Jules Bélanger,<sup>26</sup> a pure-laine Gaspésien as well as a former college professor with a doctorate from a university in France, delivered an encomium that utterly contradicts Lévesque's slurs. It was reproduced in the regional magazine, *Gaspésie*, in the issue of September 1993. The article was titled "JOHN HALL KELLY un illustre Gaspésien." Bélanger began:

It is both a pleasure and an honour, as president of the Société Historique de la Gaspésie, to contribute my modest homage to a Gaspésien who left in the memories of our elders and in our historic archives such powerful imprints. I heard my father speak

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<sup>25</sup> According to Quebec's genealogical enterprise Mes Aïeux, "Les arrière-arrière-grands-parents de Diane étaient les mêmes que les arrière-grands-parents d'Adèle, soit Antoine Dionne et Marie-Charlotte Pelletier, mariés le 1804-07-16 à St-Roch-des-Aulnaies." Personal communication received January 15, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Bélanger was also co-author of the standard history of the Gaspé, in which Kelly's career was discussed at length: Desjardins, Marc, Yves Frenette et Jules Bélanger. *Histoire de la Gaspésie*, Montréal, Boréal Express/I.Q.R.C., (1999), pp. 558-569.

so often of John Hall Kelly, and it was always with great respect and admiration. What he knew of him and what he said about him established in my mind that this person was a kind of hero of our Gaspésie.

Bélanger noted that Kelly “came from a family that had already marked favourably the history of New Carlisle.” His great-grandfather, Robert Warren Kelly, came from Dublin’s Trinity College to New Carlisle to found in 1848 a weekly newspaper, *The Gaspé Gazette*. In fact, it was the first newspaper to be published anywhere in the Gaspé or in Eastern Quebec, reaching a clientele in New Brunswick as well.<sup>27</sup> The following year, Robert Kelly also founded a literary magazine, *The Gaspé Magazine*. In the 1850s, Robert Kelly would be a founder of a literary institute in New Carlisle. He was that rarity in the Gaspé: a highly educated man. But he was also a successful businessman as the majority stockholder of the Gaspé Fishing and Coal Mining Company.

John Hall Kelly’s own father, Mancer James Kelly, worked for the Quebec government as land agent and inspector of weights and measures. So, John Kelly came from a long-established and distinguished family in the region and, contrary to the practice of white Rhodesians, his parents sent their son hundreds of miles away to study in French. Neither John Kelly nor his family were known for snobbish distance from ordinary people, as sarcastically suggested by Lévesque. On the contrary, Bélanger declared: “John was favoured with unquestionable talents which would allow him to have a brilliant, industrious and remarkable career in the service of his fellow citizens of the Gaspé and, thereafter, of all the fellow citizens of his country.”

His family’s prominence, his own talents, but also his absolutely fluent French, explain why he was elected to the Legislative Assembly with a big majority from Bonaventure County at the age of 25. His speeches in the Quebec Legislative Assembly that I have been able to find were all delivered in French.

Of his business career, Bélanger wrote:

A specialist in corporate law, he represented prestigious clients, some of whom were members of the Gaspé’s famous fishing clubs. He also represented American firms with investments in the Province of Quebec; among them, the Bank of Toronto, the Banque nationale and the Quebec and Oriental Railway were his clients.

As able in business as in law, he was the founder and president of the Bonaventure and Gaspé Telephone in 1906, the pioneer company in the Gaspé for establishing a network of telephones. He held the position of president of the New Richmond Mining Co., North American Mining Co., Gaspé Mines, Cascapédia Mines and Paspébiac Mines.

John Kelly brought the telephone to the Gaspé peninsula. Does that make him a Rhodesian because the telephone was brought by a Kelly rather than by a Leblanc or a Tremblay? His was

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Marie Fallu, « Les médias: réduire l’isolement et briser le silence, » Musée de la Gaspésie, 2013. Historian Fallu had been head of the Musée de la Gaspésie for 13 years.

an impressive business career for any one man. But, as an elected representative, as Bélanger asserts, Kelly was equally industrious and effective. “He was concerned not only for his own riding, but also for all of the Gaspé. People remember, among his good works, the Kelly covered bridges. He was involved in setting up Chandler’s pulp mill and in promoting mines in the Gaspé.”

Kelly was not just involved in economic and political activities. He cared particularly about French language schooling, as Bélanger recalled: “On October 9, 1911, he wrote a long letter to Monsignor Blais, the bishop of Rimouski, to insist on the need to give the children of New Carlisle a French school run by a religious community.” Bélanger quoted from that long letter to the bishop, written in French, that clearly indicated his commitment:

What we want is someone to take a jealous care of our little boys and our little girls, someone who will teach them that our religion is the noblest and the best and that a fervent Catholic possesses the happiest fate on earth.

I don’t know how much longer I will represent my riding as the elected member but I can assure you that as long as I hold that honour, if your lordship deigns to grant us the inestimable favour of sending us a religious community, such news will be most generously treated by me to the full extent that it will be in my power to so do.

The language was a bit awkward, but the meaning was clear: Kelly was pleading insistently for the bishop to set up in New Carlisle a French Catholic school run by a religious congregation, and he promised to raise money to bring that about. And this was the man that Lévesque treated as a closed-minded Anglo Rhodesian and a swindler?

Bélanger cites another instance of Kelly’s concern for education: “On January 7, 1924, Kelly read the pastoral letter of [the first bishop of the newly created diocese of Gaspé] Monsignor François-Xavier Ross soliciting funds for the construction of a proposed Séminaire de Gaspé. Kelly wrote the bishop that he insisted on being the first lay founder of the projected Seminary. He sent a donation of \$1,000.” The equivalent today of that amount would be many times its nominal value in 1924. And this gift helped to launch in 1926 the very institution, under the control of the Jesuits, where René Lévesque was to study in French for five years, from 1933 to 1938.

By searching the internet, one can find several instances of Kelly’s contributions to French education. For instance, a French language school inspector for Bonaventure County submitted his report (in French) for the school year 1905-1906.<sup>28</sup> The inspector wrote: “Average school attendance in the schools of my district is at 70 per cent. I am happy to bring to your attention the following fact. Thanks to the generosity of Mr. John Hall Kelly, member for Bonaventure in the provincial legislature, school attendance has increased by 10 to 20 per cent in some

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<sup>28</sup> It can be down-loaded at [https://archive.org/stream/rapportqu190506qu/rapportqu190506qu\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/rapportqu190506qu/rapportqu190506qu_djvu.txt). The original headline was: « René Lévesque engage le dialogue avec les femmes du Québec. »

municipalities where he had offered rewards for the children who attended class most regularly during the school year.” Those were French schools for French-speaking children where Kelly offered money for good attendance records.

When Kelly died in Dublin in 1941, Ireland’s president Éamon de Valera sent the following cable to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, as cited by Jules Bélanger:

I wish to express my deep sympathy to yourself and the Canadian Government, following the decease of Mr. Hall Kelly, your distinguished representative to Dublin. He was able, thanks to his personal qualities as well as his zeal and his enthusiasm for serving the cause of friendly and cordial relations between Canada and Ireland, to gain the appreciation of everyone who came to know him.

In the municipality of Bonaventure, on the Baie-des-Chaleurs, there is today a street that is named “rue John-Hall-Kelly,” in commemoration of one of the Gaspé’s most distinguished and devoted historic personalities. Lévesque felt obliged to belittle him, to denigrate him, to treat him as a scoundrel, to dismiss his accomplishments with sarcasm – why? Because John Hall Kelly was the living refutation of Lévesque’s thesis that New Carlisle was a Rhodesia and the microcosm of a Rhodesian Quebec. Kelly, an embarrassment to his thesis, just had to be vilified and transformed beyond recognition. And Lévesque demolished Kelly solely by innuendo, without bringing forward one single fact to back his thesis that Kelly symbolized Rhodesian-style dominance over French speakers.

The dishonest operation worked. When René Lévesque died in 1987, the magazine *L’actualité* put out a special issue with a multitude of articles covering the main moments of René Lévesque’s life. The section on his early years had the title: “1922-1952 Comment on devient René Lévesque.” It included a reprint of the 1966 *Châtelaine* piece by Hélène Pilote, but it now came topped by a new headline: “Le nègre blanc de New-Carlisle.” René, in his childhood, was supposedly treated as a white Negro when growing up in New Carlisle.

*L’actualité’s* own introduction to the section on René’s childhood, conveyed the same image of René’s oppression as a young French Canadian in New Carlisle:

Unlike the politicians born of bourgeois urban French-Canadian parents, Lévesque did not live sheltered from Anglophone domination. At New Carlisle, that island of Loyalist prosperity in the midst of an impoverished Gaspé, the little Francophone was a second-class citizen.

Lévesque was to be forged by the hammer and anvil of New Carlisle. The hammer was the English crawfish and their impressive high school. The anvil was the French pea soups and their modest elementary school. While very young, Lévesque threw himself into the battle. With his fists. But René was so small that his father sometimes had to accompany him on the road to school to keep him from getting beaten up.

At New Carlisle, René Lévesque became acquainted with humiliation. But he acquired an intimate understanding of the common people, of their economic and social aspirations, of their identity, of their thirst for justice.

At the Séminaire de Gaspé, Jesuits from Montreal acquainted the young Gaspesian with the men and the ideas of the 1930s: the nationalism of Lionel Groulx and of François Hertel, the reformist platform of the Action Libérale Nationale.

That is where René Lévesque had his start. Not in 1960, nor in 1945. In 1922.

Poor humiliated young René. What a hard start in life! New Carlisle revealed to him how he was oppressed by *les Anglais*, and this revelation then set the stage for his later political career founding a separatist party. It all began when his father, a young lawyer, was invited to share the law practice of the Gaspé's outstanding lawyer, businessman and political eminence. René grew up in a house where his parents always kept a maid. The boy was sent to the best private secondary school in the Gaspé, taught by the prestigious Jesuits. He had to learn to speak perfect English in New Carlisle and his bilingualism would then be the foundation of his entire career as a journalist.

There is a significant fact that, strangely, Lévesque omitted in his chapter on his childhood in New Carlisle. His recurrent narrative, as quoted by Pierre Godin, was this: "We French Canadians in New Carlisle were colonized. In this village, a small number of Anglais controlled everything, the CN railway, the bank, the general store... We were their aboriginals."

But Lévesque omitted mentioning one important institution that *les Anglais* did not control: the only local radio station, CHNC, that was owned by a French Canadian. That was significant, not just for the French-speaking population in general, but for young René in particular. During the summer of 1938, just before René and family moved to Quebec City, at the age of 15 he was hired by the radio station for a paid job as a broadcaster.

Here is the account given by Pierre Godin:

The summer holidays of 1938 were not like the others, far from it. With the beginning of summer, the audience of the local radio station heard the high-pitched voice of a 15-year-old adolescent reciting: "This is CHNC New Carlisle..." A stroke of luck: he became announcer for the holidays.

The dentist Charles Houde, owner of CHNC, hired him with Stan Chapman to replace the regular announcer, Viateur Bernard, who had taken sick. Before going on air, Chapman and René would translate the wire stories, Chapman from French to English, René from English to French, CHNC being a bilingual station. And it worked! René had just caught a virus for broadcasting that would long inhabit him.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Godin, *Un enfant du siècle*, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85. My translation.

Why did Lévesque, in his memoirs, not mention this outstanding event in the chapter on his childhood? To get a paid broadcasting job at 15 would be an extraordinary stroke of luck for any youth anywhere. Moreover, this was the beginning, the very foundation of Lévesque's later career in broadcasting, and it happened in New Carlisle. So why not talk about so singular an event in the chapter on New Carlisle? The answer is obvious. To admit that New Carlisle had given him the two gifts that founded his whole career – the early mastery of two languages and a proven early experience in radio broadcasting – would have exposed the dishonesty of his thesis that French Canadians in New Carlisle were kept in the oppressed condition of aboriginals and black Rhodesians.

It was only on page 109 in the French edition of his memoirs, in Chapter III where he retold his departure for wartime London at the age of 21, that he brought up in passing this decisive experience from his adolescence. He recalled it briefly to explain how he had acquired the experience with radio broadcasting that led to his invitation to join the Voice of America in London, and so found himself in 1944 on a boat sailing towards the Atlantic on his way to England. Here is his account:

To help us make ends meet, it happened that I would work, and work very hard, at that noble and powerful craft that is journalism, to which I had been initiated the summer I was thirteen.<sup>30</sup> Tired of seeing me wasting my time, my father had no doubt recommended me insistently for the position of translator of wired news reports for the local [New Carlisle] radio station. The position was so undemanding that, when the regular announcer went on holidays, they went so far as to invite me to voice my own compositions over the mike. It was a sublime pleasure that left me incurably nostalgic for it, to the extent that it finally led me to Radio-Canada with the title of “temporary wartime hire,” and finally to this old tub of a boat gliding past a sleeping Quebec City on the way to Halifax...<sup>31</sup>

He did not mention, even here, that a French speaker owned the local radio station and gave him such an opportunity when he was an adolescent. That would have given a very different perspective on New Carlisle, given the importance of local radio in 1938 for creating the atmosphere of a community. By broadcasting in French as well as English, the radio station gave a recognition of the importance of the French language that was incompatible with a Rhodesian mentality.

Had Lévesque intended to give an unbiased account of his childhood, he would certainly have brought up his extraordinary experience at the local radio station. He would have recalled what it felt like to go on the air at 15, to have his family and friends hear his voice over the airways and then tell him how surprised they had been. But no, he said as little as possible about this important personal experience that would set the course of his later life. To have described that

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<sup>30</sup> He was actually 15. As so often, Lévesque accounts of himself are unreliable.

<sup>31</sup> Lévesque, *Attendez que je me rappelle...*, p. 109. My translation from the French.

unique experience vividly, as only Lévesque could do, would have exposed the dishonesty of his characterization of New Carlisle as Rhodesia.

So, it is imperative to go back for a precise appreciation of what “Rhodesia” and “Rhodesian” meant in the 1960s. When Lévesque repeatedly appropriated those words to characterize French-English relations, Rhodesia was then, along with the Union of South Africa, the most flagrant example on earth, constantly in the news, of an imperialist, racist, murderous and lawless colony. That, Lévesque insisted, was the very description of New Carlisle and of French Quebec within Canada.

## CONCLUSION

René Lévesque, as an adult, was a uniquely intelligent and sophisticated commentator on world affairs. He knew exactly what Rhodesia was and he knew that it was not remotely similar in any way to New Carlisle. So why did he promulgate such an odious fabrication, such a provocative myth?

Lévesque was obsessed with self-promotion, regardless of the truth. His personal ambition was monumental. In the context of the post-war movement of decolonization and the break-up of empires, Lévesque saw the opportunity to assume the role of liberator of his supposedly oppressed people. That became his ultimate ambition.

But there were problems. Quebec was not a colony. The Québécois enjoyed equality before the law. They were the great majority in Quebec, they controlled the provincial government, which enjoyed extensive powers, and they controlled their own educational and cultural institutions. And secession, unless it came about by a Canada-wide consensus, meant overthrowing the constitutional order. That was a dangerous undertaking.

But Lévesque found a simple solution to all these problems: he understood that world opinion now recognized the right of colonies to acquire their independence. So, he declared a new status for Quebec: it was really a replica of Rhodesia – not only a racist and imperialist colony, but in fact the worst of racist imperialist colonies, on a par with the Union of South Africa. And, to give credibility to his fantastic characterization, he depicted his home town, New Carlisle, as the very microcosm of Quebec’s Rhodesian servitude.

Lévesque depicted the Anglos as controlling all the institutions – they did not; they were in the Province of Quebec, after all, and subject to all the laws passed by the Quebec government. He offered his supposedly endemic childhood battles that required his father’s protective stick as the example and the proof of two peoples at war with each other.

It was a grand fraud and a vicious libel against English speakers. But Lévesque was perceived as the prophetic announcer of a new Quebec, the natural leader to bring the Quiet Revolution to its logical term. His message was largely adopted and promulgated by Quebec’s intelligentsia: it

seemed to promise the revenge of history, the absolution for the humiliating past. He was articulate, persuasive, he knew how to speak to the heart of the people.

So the grand ambition of transforming New Carlisle and Quebec into Rhodesia's twin colonies almost worked. But not quite. His big lie is now unmasked.