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REVUE DES REVUES

Foreign Affairs, 28, No. 2 (New York, January 1950): 247-254.

BLAIR FRASER, "Labor and the Church in Quebec".

Mr. Blair Fraser is the Ottawa Editor of *Maclean's Magazine*, published semi-monthly in Toronto. He has already written a noteworthy article on

the asbestos strike of 1949 in his own journal. He now goes on to write, on the basis of this strike, an article on the whole question of labor and the Church in Quebec. It appears in the January issue of *Foreign Affairs* (New York), a publication whose prestige among students of international events is very high throughout the entire English-speaking world. Mr. Fraser writes in distinguished company. His article on Quebec is followed immediately by a study of "The Unifying Force for Europe" written by M. Paul Reynaud.

Mr. Fraser begins by describing the reelection of Mr. Duplessis in 1948 as "a triumph of the extreme Right", of "the only government north of Georgia which not only is reactionary but proud of it". "But there is no doubt", continues Mr. Fraser, "that among the rank and file of the parish priests he was a popular figure, and that this was a major factor in his sensational victory last year". This, however, "was not remarkable", because "until a few years ago the typical syndicate was heavily dominated by its chaplain, the parish priest, and the typical chaplain was pretty friendly with the management of the local mill".

Suddenly in 1949 there took place a "startling change". The Archbishop of Montreal, he admits, "had always been known for liberal views". But Mr. Fraser quotes "the Labor Day sermon of Bishop Desranleau of Sherbrooke"; and then asks, "Why did an acknowledged reactionary, in the strict sense of that misused word, thus address his flock in the language of a militant Socialist?" Here is his answer to his own question:

There seems to be good grounds for believing that the Asbestos strike unified the Quebec clergy... well to the left of their traditional ultra-conservative line... The reason... was the conviction of workers and clergy alike that this was a battle for the survival of the Catholic labor movement... The net result was a unity among the bishops, from the most liberal to the most conservative, which had never existed before on an issue of this kind... It amounted to open collision between the ultra-conservative, ultra-clerical Quebec Government, and the solid phalanx of the Church. It was a change in the social atmosphere of Quebec that might well be called revolutionary.

Mr. Fraser's fundamental explanation of the relations between labor and the Church in Quebec is therefore to be found in his statement that in the present case, "the defence of the faith coincides with the defence of the humble worker's own interests".

Mr. Fraser's concluding point, however, is that the "unity of the clergy in support of the labor movement is somewhat deceptive":

Some of the priests who backed the strikers are men who accept the motto of Abbé Lionel Groulx — "*Notre maître, le passé*"... Allied with them, for the moment, are the men who want to bring Quebec into a working, living alliance with

the rest of Canada... Probably neither side will carry its point entirely... But it does appear safe to say that Quebec... will never be quite the same again.

One cannot help but feel that Mr. Fraser has exaggerated whatever change may have occurred in the attitude of the Church. In the first place the position of the Catholic Syndicates was not an issue in the election of 1948. The majority of the electors, including the asbestos miners, were thinking of other questions when they voted for the Union Nationale. Consequently the attitude of the parish priest at that time, whatever it may have been, proves nothing with regard to their attitude on Labor questions.

Secondly, the language used by the Bishop of Sherbrooke on the Sunday before Labor Day was not that of "a militant socialist", but simply that of the socially-minded Popes. Nor has he ever been "an acknowledged reactionary" in labor matters. Far from it. He was well-known as a staunch friend of the syndicates even before he became a Bishop. To indicate that he had been a "spokesman of the Right", Mr. Fraser mentions only that he "gained notoriety by forbidding his flock to join "neutral" service clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis". But this attitude is not inconsistent with the support he has always given to Catholic syndicates. It does not put him on the "Right" in Labor matters. His present attitude is the same as it has always been.

Thirdly, even before they came under the more vigorous leadership of Gérard Picard in 1945, Catholic syndicates had been known to call strikes. In fact, there was even a violent strike in Asbestos a good many years ago. And Mr. Fraser, himself, mentions that Father Camirand, now the syndicate chaplain in Asbestos, "went through a bitter textile strike before the war." That was in Sherbrooke, and it proves that his attitude toward labor has not changed either.

All this hardly justifies the idea of a Quebec clergy holding to "their traditional ultra-conservative line" until 1949. The asbestos strike helped to clarify certain issues. But it did not really indicate any basic change in the attitude of the Church. To go even farther back into history, one might mention as an example Monseigneur Bourget who was Bishop of Montreal a hundred years ago. He was famous as a champion of the cause of labor, as well as of the cause of the Papacy.

Finally there is the point about the disciples of Canon Groulx. Mr. Fraser says they are "the men who built a Chinese Wall around Quebec." What evidence does he give for this statement? "They are the men who hope and intend that Quebec's *collèges classiques* shall not cease to follow the curriculum laid down when the *Séminaire de Québec* was founded in 1663." So writes Mr. Fraser.

This is the first time that I have heard that "notre maître, le passé" means maintaining a curriculum of 1663! "Le passé" has made us all what we are to-day. We cannot help that. But it does not forbid change. And

Canon Groulx has done his part to bring change about! He believes, however, that Quebec should become, not a shoddy imitation of English Canada, but a vibrant center for the diffusion of a vigorous, vital, and distinctive French-American civilization. It is not among *his* disciples that one is likely to find the opponents of reform. Mr. Fraser can be assured that the "men who accept the motto of Abbé Lionel Groulx" are second to none in their desire to make education available to the whole people.

Mr. Fraser is undoubtedly right when he says that "the defence of the faith coincides with the defence of the humble worker's own interests". It would be interesting if he would write another article to explain in more detail why, in his opinion, it did not seem to coincide with the interests of a government formed by a French-Canadian *Union Nationale*.

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