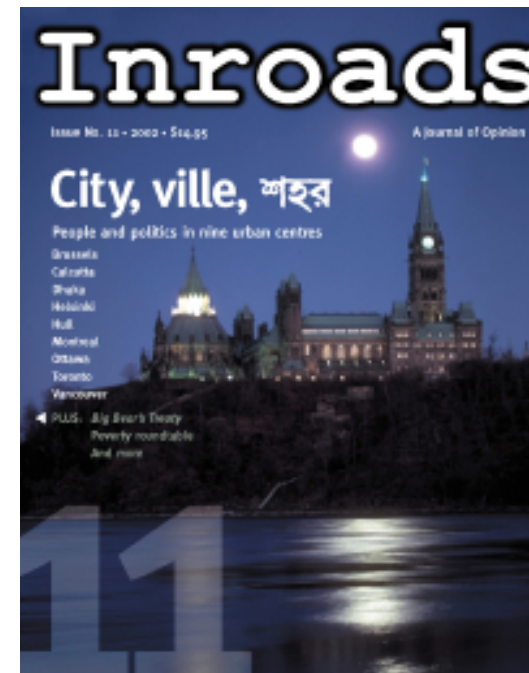


It is our pleasure to make this article from Inroads 11 available to you free of charge.

Please consider a subscription (or a small donation) to help us to continue to provide timely, thought-provoking articles in print – and often on-line – to readers across Canada and beyond.



On the last page, you will find information about subscribing. You can print it out or just send us an email or give us a call. Or you can subscribe on-line.

www.inroadsjournal.ca

Check out our website to find out more about Inroads 12, and our back issues.

Thanks.

A WORD ABOUT PRINTING THIS ARTICLE: These pages are intended to print on legal (8.5 x 14 inch) paper, two pages per sheet, in a horizontal landscape. Pages can also be printed onto letter sized paper, vertically, at a reduced size.

**Henry Milner
and Pierre Joncas**

Henry Milner is co-editor of *Inroads*. He was a founding member of the *Rassemblement des citoyens de Montréal*.

Pierre Joncas, a resident of Outremont, is a retired federal civil servant and former member of the editorial committee of *Cité libre*.

**Montreal:
Getting through
the megamerger**

The recent merger of Montreal and its suburbs was highly divisive. That in itself is hardly surprising; municipal mergers are rarely peaceful affairs. But what was particularly worrisome in Montreal's case was that it brought to the surface divisions over nationality and language that have traditionally been submerged in Quebec's municipal politics. This article describes this development in the context of last fall's election to choose the mayor and council of the new "megacity" of Montreal. It asks whether the new administration will be able to heal divisions that could have repercussions well beyond the city — for Montreal is not only the heart of Quebec, it is one of the world's truly cosmopolitan cities.

THE 1960S MARKED THE BEGINNING OF THE POLARIZATION OF QUEBEC POLITICS between Canadian nationalism (federalism) and Quebec nationalism. The language question soon became the subject of a bitter debate, notably over the question of access to English schools. For nearly three decades, Jean Drapeau dominated the Montreal political scene. Although a prominent nationalist in his youth, Monsieur le Maire harboured no sympathy for the then emerging sovereignty movement. Focused on making Montreal a world-class city, Drapeau was determined to keep municipal politics free of nationalist squabbles.

After his departure from the mayor's office in 1986, the *Rassemblement des Citoyens de Montréal* took over. With its democratic structure and diverse ethnic membership, the RCM better reflected Montreal's increasingly cosmopolitan population. Jean Doré, the new mayor, had worked for the Parti Québécois, but adopted a stance similar to Drapeau's, as did Doré's successor in 1994, Pierre Bourque. A horticulturist who had run Montreal's Botanical Garden, Bourque, too, had previous links with the PQ; but his true mentor was Jean Drapeau. Montreal's linguistic peace continued.

All that changed, however, at the end of the decade. In the middle of his second term, Bourque's ambition of annexing (although he never used the term) the 27 municipalities that shared the island of

Montreal — under Drapeau's old slogan "One Island, One City" — was unexpectedly endorsed by the Quebec government. Opposition to the merger was immediate, and fiercest in, though not confined to, those suburban municipalities with English-speaking majorities. Tens of thousands gathered in public meetings and marched in protest. Many denounced the merger as an attack on language rights. Mayors and councils challenged the merger legislation before the courts.

Given the bleak prospects of the court challenge (which was to be rejected right up to the Supreme Court), opponents worked concurrently on the electoral front. For the upcoming municipal election they recruited Gérald Tremblay, a former provincial cabinet minister, a Liberal and a moderate federalist. Tremblay negotiated a



OLD MONTREAL: Refurbished 19th century tenements and modern boutiques have made “le Vieux Montréal” attractive for residents and tourists alike.

merger with the much weakened RCM to form the Union des Citoyens et Citoyennes de Montréal (UCIM).

The campaign was not only about who should lead the new megacity but also about the legitimacy of the provincial legislation that created it. And while that legitimacy was, typically, self-evident to sovereignists and to a lesser degree to francophones, it was condemned almost unanimously by anglophones. Among the more moderate opponents was Henry Aubin, *The Gazette’s* respected regional affairs columnist, who described the merger law as “the slaughter of local governments” (December 31, 2001). For their part, the French media played up the presence and proclamations of well-known federalists among suburban mayors prominent in the UCIM. Neutrality and impartiality were hard to find.

Proponents of merging Montreal Island’s municipalities were moved by different considerations, some questionable, others valid. Pierre Bourque, arch-proponent and then mayor, claimed increased efficiency would generate economies of scale, but the head of the transition committee, which worked out the actual terms, was careful to play down that prospect. Government publicity egregiously equated city size with “greatness” and quality of urban life, citing, among others, Paris, London, New York and, disingenuously, Boston, which is an aggregate of small municipalities. Florence, to cite one counter-example, is “great” without being large. Another argument was that of fiscal equity: Island suburbs were cast as the free-riding beneficiaries of infrastructure and services paid for by an over-burdened pre-merger Montreal. In reality, these suburbs

carried their share through taxes paid to the Montreal Urban Community (MUC). The true beneficiaries of the old arrangement were off-island suburbs, whose residents are mainly employed on Montreal Island, whom the merger leaves untouched, and who will benefit as much from the new arrangement as they did from the old.

The merger has important benefits, however. One is that it transfers to a directly elected council and mayor responsibilities previously held by appointed MUC members; in theory at least, the change should increase accountability. Further, the decentralization of pre-merger Montreal should afford residents of its new boroughs a greater say in matters affecting them closely. As well, the predominantly French-speaking coun-

Government publicity egregiously equated city size with “greatness” and quality of urban life, citing Paris, London, New York and, disingenuously, Boston. Florence is “great” without being large.

cillors in “old” Montreal and the predominantly English-speaking councillors in the old suburbs may discover, once acquainted, that their reciprocal fears and mistrust were exaggerated. One can but hope.

The greatest problems with the megamerger were its manner, the hasty consultations and ramming through of legislation, and the unnecessarily centralized relationship it established between the suburban boroughs (the former “suburban” municipalities) and the new Island city. The manner can’t be undone but the centralization could be eased without surrendering the real opportunities the merger created for closer cooperation. One can perhaps find room for

optimism: one victim of the merger process was Pierre Bourque, with his high-handed, opaque management style; he was replaced with the more conciliatory, transparent and clear-minded *Gérald Tremblay*.

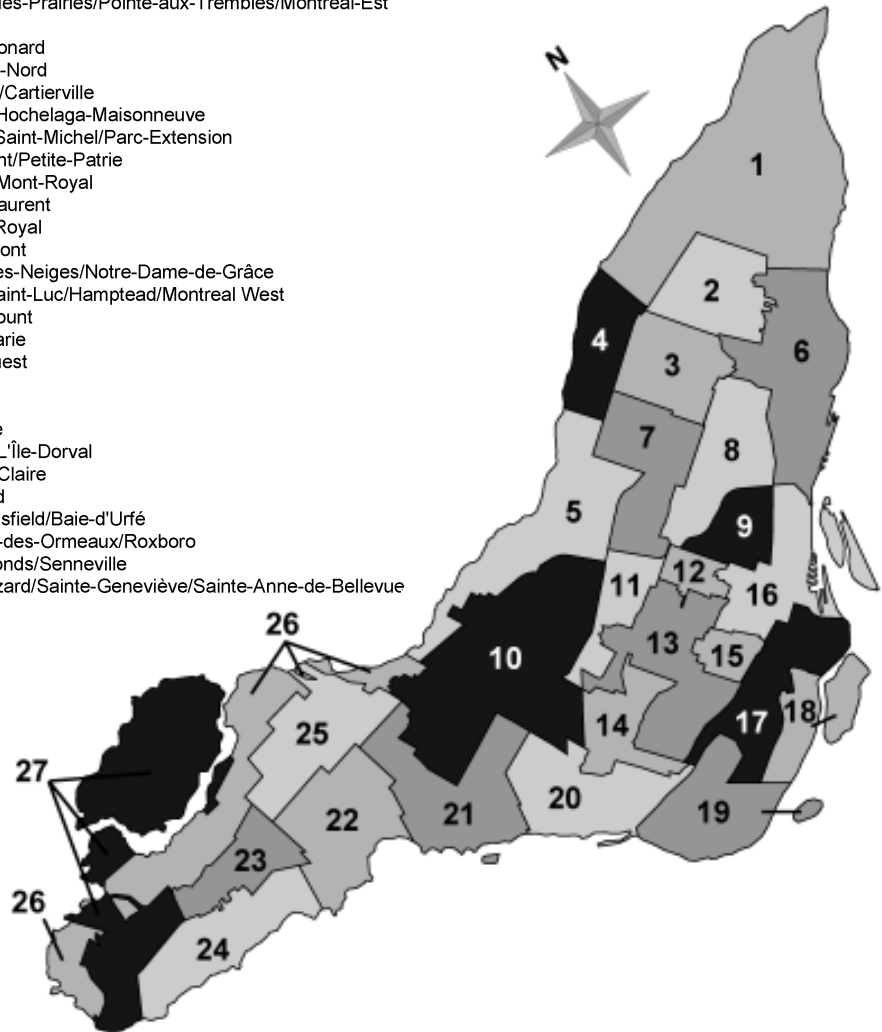
The Montreal region before the merger

Before the merger, Montreal Island’s 1.8 million people were divided among 28 municipalities with populations between one (the anomalous Dorval Island) and slightly over one million (the City of Montreal). The next five largest had populations from 60,000 to 85,000; nine had populations of fewer than 10,000. Across the St. Lawrence River to the south were eight municipalities (now merged to form the new city of Longueuil), with almost 400,000 people; immediately to the north of Montreal are the 350,000 people of Laval, created in the 1960s by uniting *Île-Jésus’* odd assortment of suburbs and semi-rural towns. Further north still, towards the Laurentians, is a hodge-podge of rapidly growing suburban municipalities.

Unification of the island municipalities had long been Jean Drapeau’s dream, but fulfilment remained elusive, opposed by the smaller suburban municipalities. (Several of these “suburbs” – Westmount and Outremont, for example – were entirely inside Montreal, whose territory, through generations of annexations, had spread out to surround them. In that sense, they were “suburbs” without being “suburban,” in the sense normally understood. In this article, “suburb” and “suburban” should be understood to include both the interior and outlying suburbs.) Unable to reach consensus, in 1970 the Quebec National Assembly accepted a commission of inquiry’s recom-

One island, one city, twenty-seven boroughs

1. Rivière-des-Prairies/Pointe-aux-Trembles/Montréal-Est
2. Anjou
3. Saint-Léonard
4. Montréal-Nord
5. Ahuntsic/Cartierville
6. Mercier/Hochelaga-Maisonneuve
7. Villeray/Saint-Michel/Parc-Extension
8. Rosemont/Petite-Patrie
9. Plateau Mont-Royal
10. Saint-Laurent
11. Mount Royal
12. Outremont
13. Côte-des-Neiges/Notre-Dame-de-Grâce
14. Côte-Saint-Luc/Hampstead/Montreal West
15. Westmount
16. Ville-Marie
17. Sud-Ouest
18. Verdun
19. LaSalle
20. Lachine
21. Dorval/L'Île-Dorval
22. Pointe-Claire
23. Kirkland
24. Beaconsfield/Baie-d'Urfé
25. Dollard-des-Ormeaux/Roxboro
26. Pierrefonds/Senneville
27. L'Île-Bizard/Sainte-Geneviève/Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue



mentation to create a second tier of government, the Montreal Urban Community, to coordinate island-wide services, notably public transportation, police, water treatment, and property evaluation.

Next, in 1991, under the Ryan Reform (named for then Liberal minister of municipal affairs Claude Ryan), the province began to download financial responsibility for

local services to the municipalities. Province-wide, the downloading amounted to roughly \$500 million, about half to Montreal Island municipalities. This process brought to light the urgency of more equitable sharing of the costs of services provided by the (then) City of Montreal but enjoyed by people who paid local taxes elsewhere. The municipal administration com-

plained that the Ryan Reform added net costs of \$120 million – in the midst of a recession during which unemployment in Montreal shot up to over 17 per cent.

Events accelerated with the report of the Pichette Commission, set up by Claude Ryan to address the fiscal, economic and social inequities of urban sprawl around Montreal. The Pichette Report focused on proposals for the entire metropolitan area and, while not specifically considering mergers, gave rise to a view in Quebec City that what was needed was a regional tier of government with direct elections to cover the entire metropolitan region and its 3.3 million inhabitants. This idea was massively and vigorously opposed on the North and South shores, both Péquiste strongholds.

Pre-merger Montreal was constantly short of funds and Bouchard came to realize this was due, in good part, to a tax structure that favoured suburban municipalities.

Resistance also came from nationalists who feared that, sooner or later, the region would be dominated by non-francophones.

That ambitious plan was to be replaced by a watered-down version in 2000, when, with little fanfare, Quebec created the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal. The CMM council is composed of 28 members – 14 from Montreal Island's now single municipality and 14 from municipalities on the north and south shores, all appointed from among elected officials. The CMM has a role in land use planning and coordinating transportation across the region; and it allocates fiscal transfers to social housing. Its budget is a tiny fraction of those of its member municipalities.

Enter Pierre Bourque and Lucien Bouchard

While Jean Doré had pursued a strategy of cooperation with the suburbs, soon after his election in 1994, Pierre Bourque, like Jean Drapeau, proved to be more confrontational. The consolidation of municipalities returned to the agenda, and was quietly discussed and promoted in government circles. Bourque began talking up “Une île, une ville” and put his case to the new premier, Lucien Bouchard. At the same time, Quebec City mayor Jean-Paul L'Allier was eager to see Quebec's neighbouring municipalities – especially Ste-Foy, to which Laval University and a number of new university-linked high-tech companies paid their taxes – joined to the capital.

To everyone's surprise, when Bouchard and his cabinet were sworn into office in early 1996, the premier signalled his municipal concerns by creating a separate ministry for Metropolitan Montreal and appointing Serge Ménard, a senior minister, as its head. Ménard was to bring some order to metropolitan governance, but he got nowhere when it came to transforming its structures.

For the time being the issue was dropped. There were other pressing matters, especially negotiations with public sector workers. Even so, a prerequisite to getting finances in order was to deal with the cities, more specifically to reduce transfers to municipalities by another \$500 million. Bouchard conducted the negotiations himself and discovered that Pierre Bourque was a local politician he could work with – especially after the mayor had appointed Guy Coulombe, a former director of Hydro Québec, as, in effect, city manager.

Pre-merger Montreal was constantly short of funds and Bouchard came to realize this

was due, in good part, to a tax structure that favoured suburban municipalities. He decided something had to be done. With public sector unions and education reform having been successfully disposed of, at the outset of the 1998 provincial election campaign Bouchard announced, again to everyone's surprise, that the time had come to restructure municipal government. He combined the ministries of Municipal Affairs and Metropolitan Montreal under long-serving minister and party stalwart Louise Harel, and Bourque turned his sales campaign to the new powerful minister. But no one predicted what was to come: first, Harel had previously ruled out "One Island, One City" in favour of a second-tier regional structure; second, concern was strong in caucus and cabinet over creating a large political entity with a majority whose mother tongue was not French; and third, there was the danger of exposing an even larger city to the havoc-wreaking local of the blue collar workers' union.

But even as hopes of creating a strong, regional tier of municipal government faded, the Premier remained committed to promoting the competitiveness of Quebec City and to securing fiscal equity among users of Montreal's services; some form of municipal amalgamation was obviously going to take place. But though encouraged to do so, elected officials in the suburbs could not, or would not, come up with counter-proposals (for example, "one island, three/five/seven cities," which, it was reported, the premier would have taken seriously). The choice, it seemed, was between "One Island, One City" and the status quo.

External factors, too, help explain the gradual shift in Premier Bouchard's position. The federal government, determined to reduce its own deficit, was exerting heavy

pressure on all the provinces by downloading costly responsibilities while at the same time drastically reducing transfer payments. Meanwhile, Ontario Premier Mike Harris, who was on good personal terms with Bouchard, undertook massive municipal reform by merging municipalities and downloading local services to the new cities (See the article by Rae Murphy elsewhere in this issue). Many Quebecers came to feel the need to create a larger French-speaking city to balance the influence of an enlarged Toronto.

In the end, while Bouchard remained concerned that municipal amalgamation would reopen the explosive language issue, he was convinced that there was an urgent need, province-wide, for a more efficient system of municipal governments to which responsibilities for economic initiatives could be delegated; for municipal structures equipped to deliver the local services required to support such initiatives; and for municipalities large enough to generate economies of scale and thus reduce expenditures. These considerations led the Quebec government, in late 2000, to announce municipal reform through mergers across the province: in Montreal and Quebec City, and in the Trois-Rivières, Hull, and Lac St-Jean/Saguenay areas.

The language issue and the Bernard Plan

In some regions, for example Lac St-Jean/Saguenay, the most contentious issue was naming the new city. In Montreal, the ever-thorny language problem presented the greatest complication.

Quebec legislation permits municipalities with a majority of English-speaking residents to choose to be designated bilingual.

After amalgamation, it was determined that the goal was to maintain equilibrium: those living in bilingual or unilingual jurisdictions should continue to do so. To this end, the government created a system of boroughs and amended the merger law so that the 50 per cent rule giving municipalities bilingual status would apply to the newly created boroughs (although those whose mother tongue was neither English nor French would no longer be counted as anglophones). The boundaries of boroughs replacing municipalities were drawn to ensure that residents of pre-merger bilingual municipalities didn't find themselves in a unilingual borough, and vice versa. For example, the new borough of N.D.G./Côte-des-Neiges, previously part of pre-merger and officially unilingual Montreal, did not receive official bilingual status because, although non-Francophones made up more than half of its population, inhabitants whose mother tongue was English did not. In addition, the new megacity could not become officially bilingual even if (or when – as alarmists predicted) non-Francophones became the majority.

The process setting out the boroughs' boundaries and their powers turned out to be lengthy. In an attempt to find a workable compromise with the suburbs based on the above principles, Bouchard appointed an advisory committee headed by Louis Bernard, a long-time top-level civil servant. Unable to persuade representatives of the suburbs to propose alternatives, the Bernard committee devised a plan under which 14 predominantly English-speaking suburban municipalities would retain their linguistic status as bilingual boroughs and all boroughs would be given real powers, including some tax levying authority. Bernard went further in the direction of

decentralization than many expected – including Pierre Bourque. However, more than a dozen suburban councils reacted with resolutions condemning the report.

The failure of suburban mayors and councils to accept the Bernard challenge proved to be a major blunder. Perhaps they assumed Bouchard was determined to implement Bernard's recommendations and therefore saw no point in wasting political capital. But the Premier and the government went in the other direction, at least in part because of union pressure. The Bernard Plan would have effectively prevented city-wide union monopolies, potentially giving the new boroughs in the former city of Montreal powers similar to those of the old suburbs. The unions had vowed a fight to the finish against this recommendation, since, they argued, it would deprive them of their acquired rights as employees of the City of Montreal. It would seem the Premier judged he could not fight the mayors and the unions at the same time.

As a result, Bill 170 provided for the negotiation of protocols between the new urban authorities and a consortium of existing unions – a situation acceptable, and possibly advantageous, to the unions. (The details will not be known until protocols are signed.) But having bought at least tentative peace with the unions, the government adopted a hard line towards the suburbs. Bill 170, as tabled in the National Assembly, diluted the principle of autonomous boroughs. The larger former suburbs were to become boroughs; the smaller, parts of boroughs. Borough services would be supervised by borough councils, some of whose members would also serve as city councillors, the ratio varying with the size of the borough. The law provided that on January 1, 2002, Montreal's 28 municipali-



NE TOUCHEZ PAS A MA VILLE

WORD ON THE STREET: Automobile rear-window stickers, balcony posters and badges said “No” – in French – to Montreal’s merger. Four months after the event, this balcony poster in Outremont still protests.

ties would be merged into one city of 1.8 million people, divided into 27 boroughs, each controlling two-thirds of its budget and responsible for local municipal services, but without the power to tax. With exceptions, such as Mount Royal (the mountain, not the suburb), zoning was to become a borough responsibility. The government allowed little time for real debate, and the opposition spent most of that time protesting that it was being gagged. The bill was rushed through the National Assembly, and a committee was appointed to ensure a smooth transition.

Hence what might have been a golden opportunity was lost. Had suburban mayors and councils accepted the Bernard proposal as an honourable compromise, a dif-

ferent climate might have been created, one which would have enabled the suburban municipalities to better preserve their autonomy and identity. Instead, on huge billboards erected in strategic suburban locations, they proclaimed “Don’t touch my city.”

Mayors and councils argued that Bill 170 marked the end of local institutions built at great cost over generations, through which people worked for the good of the community with little or no remuneration. But they themselves were in part to blame, having refused a compromise that would have met some of their concerns while making it possible to channel some local energies to wider Montreal concerns, some especially relevant to the poorer parts of Montreal and some inner-city suburbs.

THE TREMBLAY TEAM:
Victorious, and united –
but for how long?



The new alliance

While the RCM opposition embraced the Bernard Plan, Pierre Bourque was pleased to see it scuttled in favour of Bill 170. After Lucien Bouchard’s sudden departure from politics in early 2001, Bill 170’s implementation fell squarely on the shoulders of Louise Harel and she joined forces with Pierre Bourque as a passionate and vocal defender of “One Island, One City.” Nor was she reticent about drawing out the linguistic implications: in one instance she responded to a rather mild criticism by accusing the questioner, a Liberal backbencher from off the Island, of defending the “anglo-colonial attitudes” of Westmount.

The Harel-Bourque alliance extended beyond the adoption of Bill 170 to the upcoming island-wide election. Not only was Bourque the most enthusiastic supporter of the merger but, at the time, he seemed likely to win the mayoralty, with coat-tails long enough to ensure his Vision Montreal candidates a majority of seats on council. The strategy was to isolate suburban opponents of the merger by casting them as extremists. The counter-strategy of the suburban mayors was to choose as their leader and mayoral candidate a man from outside their ranks, who could not be identified with the anti-merger movement. Since Gérald Tremblay lived in the upper-middle-class enclave of Outremont, he could, however, be tarred as beholden to the suburban

mayors. Harel and Bourque remained confident of victory on the strength of solid support from a majority within the old Montreal boundaries, which accounted for almost 60 per cent of eligible voters.

There was an ethnolinguistic division, but it should not be exaggerated. While the most fervent opposition to the merger came from the predominantly English-speaking suburban municipalities, many suburban francophones were also opposed. And while one often heard, in the courts and elsewhere, that the merger was an attack on the anglophone community and a violation of its rights, few suburban opponents stressed this claim. Nonetheless, with flamboyant Guy Bertrand (former intransigent sovereignist, now intransigent federalist) leading the charge, the most extreme elements made their way into the media, and the public perception was, in good part, that the contest was between defenders of anglophone rights and those seeking to reinforce the position of the French language in Quebec’s largest city.

As informed observers on both sides expected, the court challenge failed. Linguistic polarization continued to grow and

anglophone opposition to the merger increased, even within Montreal. Meanwhile, as an organization, the Parti Québécois was increasingly drawn into the battle against those who were seen as wanting to weaken the French language.

The opposition unites

However hopeful Bourque's prospects of victory, they were dependent on division among his opponents. As the 2001 megacity campaign approached, it seemed likely he would face both Tremblay and a third force built around the RCM opposition in City Hall. In all likelihood, this would have ensured his election as the first mayor of the new city.

With fewer than 10 city councillors out of more than 50, opposition in Montreal City Hall was weak; it was also divided. All that remained of the once mighty RCM was a four-member caucus, all from the "Plateau" area, which made up the Official Opposition. As opposition councillors outside the RCM were reaching their own deals with Tremblay and the suburban mayors, negotiations between Tremblay and the RCM, though frequently stalled, were proceeding. To general surprise an agreement was reached and a new party, the Union des citoyens et des citoyennes de l'Île de Montréal (UCIM), was born in early July, in good time for the November elections. There was now a single, united opposition to Bourque, with broad support in the suburbs compensating for a still relatively narrow base in the city.

It was, however, a delicate unity. Many suburban UCIM candidates, still on record as being anti-merger, found themselves alongside candidates sympathetic to the merger and campaigning under the pro-

merger Tremblay slogan "It's Going To Work." Nonetheless, once the UCIM was created, Tremblay surged in the polls; suddenly he was neck-and-neck with Bourque.

A divisive campaign

Little was done to dissipate the widespread but unjustified perception that the campaign centred on issues that divided people along linguistic lines, especially since the merger issue, which did have linguistic dimensions, dogged the campaign from beginning to end. On one occasion, Tremblay let it be understood that, were he elected, the new city administration would pursue the court case, although he backed away from this position almost immediately. (As it turned out, the whole matter became moot even before his team took office when, in late 2001, the Supreme Court of Canada refused to hear an appeal.) On another occasion, Bourque told opponents of the megacity simply not to vote for him.

For the most part though, while the merger remained high on the list of voter preoccupations in the suburbs, mayoral candidates soft-pedalled or ignored it. The language question arose on occasion, with Bourque extolling the merits of existing arrangements under which the City, although not required to do so, already offered services in English where numbers warranted, meaning that, in this regard, the merger was not a threat. In an attempt to court its voters, he promised to study extending the Metro to the West Island. He also boasted that over a third of his candidates were of neither English nor French mother tongue. Tremblay stuck to promising improved services, decentralization, and enhanced public consultation.

From the polls and demographics it became obvious well before the election that Bourque's candidates would not form a majority on council. The total population of the suburban seats combined with opposition strongholds in pre-merger Montreal – concentrated in though not confined to English-speaking neighbourhoods – added up to more than half the total. Bourque might still have squeaked through as mayor, but only if enough anti-merger suburban voters, angered by Tremblay's waffling on the merger issue, boycotted the election or voted for independent anti-merger candidates.

None of this happened. Bourque's strong support in the predominantly French-speaking centre and east end was not enough to compensate for his weakness in the mainly English-speaking, suburban boroughs, where Tremblay and his UCIM candidates won majorities ranging from 65 to over 90 per cent. And the makeup of the new council further underlined the linguistic divide. In the pre-merger city, Bourque's PQ supporters had helped his candidates defeat the half dozen UCIM candidates most strongly identified with the PQ, including two incumbents, and, as a result, only nine of the 42 UCIM candidates elected came from pre-merger Montreal, all from districts with significant English-speaking populations. The effect of the federal Liberals' intervention, on the side of Bourque, is hard to gauge; while Bourque's candidates did fairly well in traditional Liberal suburban boroughs with strong immigrant populations, and while some scored respectably in francophone suburbs as well, not a single one was elected: each of Vision Montréal/Équipe Bourque's 31 seats came from pre-merger Montreal. Tremblay's personal majority over Bourque was a slim 4 per cent.

Despite the intense public battle over the merger, only 47.7 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots, no higher, on average, than in previous municipal elections. But in the anti-merger suburbs with English-speaking majorities, turnout was higher than usual, typically in the 55 to 60 per cent range.

A new team takes over

When the dust cleared, Gérald Tremblay found himself mayor with a comfortable working majority on council. His credibility as leader of the new Montreal – rather than as Trojan horse for those who would dismantle it – was yet to be determined, however. Appointment to the new executive committee was an early test. There was a glut of talent from non-francophone areas, as evidenced by the multicultural composition of the UCIM caucus. (Of 104 UCIM candidates, including those who ran only at the borough level, 30 were English-speaking of other than Anglo-Saxon origin – notably Italian, Jewish and Greek; 14 were elected.) However, no UCIM candidates were elected from the nationalist, French-speaking centre and east end. Michel Prescott, leader of the former RCM opposition, carried a nearby area that included traditionally ethnic "Main" (St. Lawrence Street). He was named vice-chair of the executive committee. Five of its 11 members came from pre-merger Montreal, but a majority, including chairman Frank Zampino, were chosen from suburban boroughs – a fact stressed by now opposition leader Bourque, always quick to seize any opportunity to paint the new administration as stooges of the former suburbs, and himself as the true defender of pre-merger Montreal; nor has it been allowed to pass unnoticed that at least two English-speaking execu-



DOWNTOWN MONTREAL SKYLINE: A 19th century church and 20th century skyscraper encapsule Montreal's ageless quality.

Challenges facing the new administration

“One Island, One City” officially came into existence on January 1st, 2002, with the formal disappearance of the old suburban municipalities and the swearing-in of the

new administration. Its first order of business was to adopt a budget, but this was largely a matter of accepting the transition committee's recommendations, which went no further than retaining what equity had been built in through the Montreal Urban Community. Hence, at least for the time being, the transition committee could be held responsible for perpetuating disparities between richer and poorer boroughs.

Meanwhile, work began on reorganizing services. In pre-merger Montreal everything had been run from City Hall, so one of the trickiest tasks would be to decentralize services to the new borough Councils, which, as yet, had no administrative support to implement decisions. In contrast, the suburban boroughs had Councils and administrations in place, but they were reduced in size, their scope of jurisdiction was sharply reduced, and their powers of taxation were removed altogether. Meanwhile, Montrealers island-wide now had access to the generally better services, such as libraries and recreation programs, which previously had been restricted to residents of the wealthier suburbs.

tive committee members had been among the most vociferous anti-merger spokespeople.

Mayor Tremblay, understandably, contends that distinctions between suburbs and city, between pro- and anti-merger, no longer apply; all are now Montrealers. Putting these ideas into practice, however, is the main challenge facing his administration. Although the two former anti-merger suburban mayors on the executive committee, Peter Yeomans and Robert Libman, have emphasized their determination to make the new city work, the French media have played up their earlier positions – especially that of Libman, who had been leader of the Equality Party, which had been (and remains) ultra-federalist and fiercely opposed to Quebec language laws. For its part, the English media were determined to prove the accuracy of their prediction that merger was a threat to the English language, and concentrated on the fact that French was the working language of the new administration and Council: this was hardly news, however, since in practice this had been the case for a considerable length of time.

Much was happening all at once, providing openings for opportunists, and opportunities for the inexperienced to blunder. The Tremblay administration was seriously embarrassed when it awarded an important contract to a firm established by Tremblay himself but with which he had, by then, severed ties. The firm subsequently withdrew its bid, and the contract was cancelled; but the damage was done.

In Quebec, jockeying for position in the imminent provincial election has begun. At the end of January, Louise Harel lost her job in a cabinet shuffle and was replaced at municipal affairs by André Boisclair, an ambitious 35-year-old who will do his best to mend fences. But the forced mergers have badly damaged the PQ's electoral prospects throughout the province.

Across the aisle, opposition leader Jean Charest has reiterated his promise to allow citizens to vote for “de-mergers,” although he stresses that those who choose to do so will be expected to bear the costs, however onerous. Moreover, *Le Soleil*, the Quebec City daily, quoted a Liberal member of the National Assembly as saying, “No one really believes things can return to what they were.” It has also been reported that people close to Tremblay are urging Charest's advisors to forget about de-mergers, at least for the new Montreal. Tremblay denies having sent anyone, but he stops short of denying the occurrence or expressing disapproval.

In practice, the longer mergers are in force the more difficult and costly it will be to undo them. Premier Landry seems to be putting off the next election for as long as he can. If, as appears probable, Charest and the Liberals win the next election, de-mergers will not be high on the agenda: the cost would likely be so steep as to dishearten all but the most affluent and extreme.

What may lie ahead

The new Montreal inherits from pre-merger Montreal large debts, including an important actuarial pension debt. A guiding principle of the merger is that each borough must assume responsibility for its pre-merger debt, with that of pre-merger Montreal (roughly \$2 billion, about half pension-related) to be divided among its nine boroughs. While there will be gradual harmonization of service-related current expenditures, pre-merger debt is not, in theory at least, to be equalized between urban and suburban boroughs. As for the actuarial debt in employee pensions, sooner or later the shortfall will have to be funded. Who will bear the costs – the taxpayers of pre-merger Montreal's nine successor boroughs or taxpayers island-wide – will likely be contentious down the road.

Then there is the matter of unions. Relations between the pre-merger Montreal administration and its blue-collar workers were often contentious. Union members have destroyed public property, and rioting by blue collar workers led to the conviction of union head Jean Lapierre on charges of criminal vandalism. (After a spell in jail, he returned to his old post.) Not surprisingly, there is widespread concern about the outcome of upcoming contract negotiations, and a playful exchange of snowballs between Lapierre and Mayor Tremblay won't be enough to convince citizens that the unions have turned over a new leaf.

The new mayor finds himself in an awkward position, since he owes his victory to the support of pre-merger suburbs where anti-merger resentment remains intense even if muted. While his advisors try to discourage Liberal talk about de-mergers, Tremblay refuses to discuss the matter and reiterates his pledge to make the megacity

work. Meanwhile, merger opponents on council face a difficult choice: (a) turn against an administration in which they enjoy much influence; or (b) defend – or at least accept – a merger they fought fiercely to prevent and promised solemnly to overturn. If they choose the former, they will lose their clout immediately; if they choose the latter, they risk defeat in the next election. If they choose the former, Tremblay will have to seek an unwelcome or fragile alliance with elements in the Bourque camp or watch his administration be paralyzed until it is defeated.

Inasmuch as one purpose of the merger was to redress a real fiscal overload in pre-merger Montreal, it was doomed to fail. Previously, residents of island suburbs paid their share of common services (e.g. public transportation, police), mostly through participation in the Montreal Urban Community. In contrast, even though off-island suburban commuters (from Longueuil, Laval and Laurentian municipalities) continue to use the costly urban infrastructure, notably roads, their tiny contributions to the expenses of the Montreal area metropolitan community (CMM) are unchanged.

Pierre Bourque succeeded in turning Montreal into “One Island, One City” at the cost of his, and his party’s, electoral defeat. And, by legislating mergers that offended not only suburban Montrealers but others as well, the PQ may have sealed its own defeat in the upcoming provincial election: in the Saguenay, chief stronghold of the sovereigntist cause, where merger was contested, the seat previously held by Lucien Bouchard himself was won by the Liberal candidate in the by-election following his resignation.

But the story will not necessarily end there: mergers could have still other unin-

tended and unpredictable consequences.

For Montrealers, old and new, the challenges are manifold. There is a call to preserve the sense of identity and belonging in suburban boroughs, to create similar feelings in the new boroughs of pre-merger Montreal, and to give borough councils a role beyond that of merely doling out funds handed down from City Hall. There is a parallel call for the suburban boroughs to accept responsibility to help meet island-wide needs and solve island-wide problems. There is a call for sensitive and skilful diplomacy on the part of all to prevent the resurgence of language-related tensions. In this connection, the restraint of opinion leaders in predominantly anglophone sub-

The new mayor finds himself in an awkward position, since he owes his victory to the support of pre-merger suburbs where anti-merger resentment remains intense even if muted.

urban boroughs – politicians, media, and language activists – will be crucial.

After the coming provincial election, whichever party holds office – and provided its approach is conciliatory rather than confrontational – the government will be in a position to help calm troubled waters. While de-merger is unlikely, it should be possible, at modest cost, to recast Montreal’s charter along federal-like lines, in particular by transferring tax raising authority for specific purposes from the city to its boroughs. This is speculation, of course, laced with some wishful, although hardly extravagant, thinking. Whatever happens, Montreal should remain a good place to call home. ■

Inroads

now twice yearly

subscriptions • 2 years (4 issues) • \$48
(students \$36 • institutions \$60)

Inroads, Suite A, 3777 Kent Avenue,
Montreal, Quebec H3S 1N4

subscription info: 514.731.2691
or by email: inroads@canada.com

On subscribe on-line at www.inroadsjournal.ca

Prices include taxes.

Foreign orders in U.S. funds. as quoted above.

Visa and Mastercard accepted.