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Gérard Filion
1909-2005



Le Devoir publisher, nationalist and businessman Gerard Filion was an early proponent of overhauling Quebec's traditional economic and educational systems. An outspoken critic of Maurice Duplessis, he was a modernizer, a not-so-quiet advocate of the changes that Jean Lesage was trying to implement in the 1960s and one of the earliest Quebecois nationalists to argue that controlling Quebec's economy was essential if the province were ever to be *maître chez nous*.

"He was a critical link in the evolution of French- Canadian thinking," said historian Patrice Dutil, director of research at the Institute of Public Administration of Canada.

"He was in the Quiet Revolution when it started in the 1950s and he participated in its implementation in the 1960s in very significant ways," said historian Ramsay Cook, general editor of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. "He kept arguing that French Canadians had to come to terms with urban and industrial society. He did that partly because he had a commerce degree and because he hooked up with people like André Laurendeau and Pierre Laporte. They began talking about a modernized French-Canadian nationalism, which accepted the fact that this was an urban society in which industry was important."

Wilfrid Laurier was still prime minister when Gérard Filion, the youngest of 19 children of Alfred and Philomène Filion, was born on a farm in Isle Verte, a community on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River between Rivière-du-Loup and Rimouski. From the time he was a boy, he dreamed of becoming a businessman. Realizing the dream took him 50 years.

He was educated by the priests at a *collège classique* in Rimouski, earned an arts degree at Université Laval and a degree in commerce from the École des Hautes Études Commerciales in Montreal, graduating in 1934 during the Depression. Opportunities for francophones were slim in the anglo-dominated Montreal business world, so Mr. Filion finally found a job a year later at the Union Catholique des Cultivateurs as an economist researching farm products for what was essentially the Quebec Farmers Union. "It was more or less a temporary job," he told The Canadian Press in 1974, "but I stayed 12 years."

In 1937, he married Françoise Servêtre, with whom he had nine children. During his tenure at the farmers union, he was general secretary, founder and first general manager of the UCC's insurance company, a critic of conscription during the Second World War, and the publisher of the weekly newsletter La Terre de Chez Nous. It was this last connection that led to a job offer to become publisher of Le Devoir, the nationalist newspaper that had been founded by Henri Bourassa in 1910, a position that Mr. Filion accepted in 1947 at the age of 37. "For me, it was more or less a temporary job -- I was still thinking of a business career," Mr. Filion said once again, "but I stayed 16 years."

He began by expressing views that "shocked" Louis St. Laurent (then secretary of state for external affairs in Mackenzie King's Liberal government) when he wrote in an editorial manifesto that he believed Canada should be a republic and cut all ties with Britain and the Commonwealth. While Mr. Filion was at the helm of Le Devoir, the paper defended the workers on strike in the asbestos industry in 1949 and won three national newspaper awards for editorial writing (in 1951, 1958 and 1960). He persuaded his friend André Laurendeau to become editor, recruited Claude Ryan (who would eventually become editor in 1964) to cover the Second Vatican Council for the paper and published Pierre Laporte's articles on the natural-gas scandal

in 1958 that helped bring about the eventual defeat of the Duplessis government. He also reorganized Le Devoir's finances and shifted publication from the afternoon to the morning, thus saving the paper from collapse several times.

He was a vocal opponent of Mr. Duplessis and his Union Nationale government, criticizing many of the premier's strong-arm tactics. "I never hated Duplessis," M. Filion told Le Devoir in 2000.

"Without Duplessis, I would have been an ordinary journalist. He made me."

Mr. Filion also played a huge role in revamping the church-dominated educational system in Quebec, both through Le Devoir's editorial stance and, after the election of Mr. Lesage in 1960, his active participation in the Parent commission (1961-66).

A hugely energetic man, he was elected mayor of St- Bruno (near Montreal) in 1960 (a position he held until 1968), while he was still at Le Devoir, and served as vice-president of the Canada Council from 1962 to 1964. It was not until 1963 that Mr. Filion, then 54, left Le Devoir and became the full-time businessman he had always wanted to be, as general manager of the newly formed General Investment Corp., which had been set up by the Lesage government. GIC was both a lending society for struggling businesses and an investor in industries in key sectors of the economy. Although not a socialist as the term is defined now, Mr. Filion crusaded for the state to play a much stronger role in helping small local businesses to grow into larger operations.

In 1966, he was appointed president of Marine Industries Ltd., a shipbuilding and manufacturing firm under GIC's majority ownership with nearly 5,000 employees. The business career that had eluded him most of his working life got him into trouble when he was later charged with fraud in a series of dredging contracts. He was accused, along with 10 other men and nine companies, of conspiring to defraud public agencies of more than \$4,279,000 by rigging bids on dredging contracts between 1969 and 1975. After an 11-month trial that ended in May of 1979, Mr. Filion was acquitted; his lawyer, Edward Greenspan, was able to show that Mr. Filion could not have been at the meetings where plans were laid to rig bids.

What makes the trial memorable was neither its length nor its cost, but the fact that Mr. Filion appealed unsuccessfully to Roy McMurtry, then Ontario attorney-general, to be tried in Ottawa before a French-speaking judge and jury. It is hard to believe today that such an accommodation was not possible 25 years ago. At the time, Mr. Greenspan speculated that his client could have become lieutenant-governor of Quebec if the dredging scandal had not snared him in its grimy tentacles.

Gerard Filion was born on Aug. 18, 1909, at Isle Verte, Que. He died in Montreal on Saturday. He was 95.

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