At about the time this issue of The Social Contract *reaches our readers, Quebec will be voting on its future within Canada. The points of contention are language and, since language is the carrier of culture, differences in culture. Are today's immigration policies in the U.S. setting the stage for future conflicts along these same lines? Reviewer Mark Clayton is a staff writer at* The Christian Science Monitor. *This review, which appeared on August 10, is reprinted by permission.*

Cultures in Conflict

A Book Review by Mark Clayton

OH CANADA! OH QUEBEC!
REQUIEM FOR A DIVIDED COUNTRY
By Mordecai Richler
Alfred A. Knopf, 1992
278 pp. $23

It's tempting for outsiders to shake their heads and wonder why on earth Canada — recently ranked by the United Nations as the world's best place to live — is tied in knots of political self-doubt and might even follow Czechoslovakia down the road of national breakup.

Canada's French-speaking province of Quebec is demanding "distinct society" status and a slew of powers to protect its French heritage. And leading figures in Quebec are raising their voices to say that if Quebec cannot get such protections, the province should split from Canada and form a new country.

The long-bubbling constitutional debate reaches a boil this fall with a referendum on sovereignty in Quebec. And though much has been written in recent years either promoting such a breakup, or ques-tioning its wisdom, little light has been shed on a central stumbling block to Canadian unity: the rapid growth of Quebec separatism fueled by rising nationalism.

Mordecai Richler's *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec! Requiem for a Divided Country* (Alfred A. Knopf, 277 pp., $23) sheds heat as well as light on the growth of nationalism in the province and its interweaving with French cultural identity. The combination, he argues, has produced a cultural nationalism fueled by emotion and increasing intolerance of minorities, most notably Quebec's resident Jewish and English-speaking populations. It has also, he writes, led to much wasted time squabbling over non-issues.

"A Quebecer born and bred, I suffer from a recurring nightmare that all of us, French- and English-speaking, will one day be confronted by our grandchildren, wanting to know what our generation was about when the Berlin Wall crumbled … We will be honor bound to reply, why, in Quebec, we were hammering each other over whether or not bilingual commercial signs could be posted outside as well as inside, … over whether or not Quebec could be officially crowned `a distinct society.'"

Note that this book, while little-known in the United States, is extremely controversial at home. After excerpts of the book appeared in *The New Yorker* last fall, Richler found himself under assault from politicians, newspaper publishers and columnists, and even mocked on the streets of Montreal where he lives.

Perhaps best known for his novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Richler's razor-sharp logic and wit target cultural anomalies that include, for example, Montreal's vigilante "tongue troopers" who snap photos of outdoor signs to help the provincial language commission make sure they meet restrictive language laws that limit (or ban in the case of outdoor commercial signs) the use of English. Indoors, bilingual signs are permitted as long as French predominates in color and size of lettering.

The language laws also govern speech used during the conduct of business. Richler recalls an aborted government plan exposed in the local press in which "undercover shoppers were to be sent out to make 4,500 visits to local stores to determine whether salespeople greeted their customers in French or the language of *les autres* [the others]."

Using scores of examples, Richler documents, dissects, and exposes the ideological underpinnings of such laws. Some examples and some of Richler's clever slices at them have a pungent twist readers may not appreciate. Yet all serve to chip away steadily at the logic of trying to legislate the maintenance of French culture. Instead, he argues, the province and its French heritage are a valuable party of Canada's identity more likely to survive without the help of the bureaucrats or politicians — and without laws infringing on minority rights of free expression.

But although darts thrown at the language laws take up a good deal of space in the book, this appears to be only one of several arguments meant to undermine the nationalist Parti Québécois position that separating from Canada would cost Quebecers little or nothing at all.

"I am for a referendum in 1992, providing Ottawa has the guts and Quebec the honesty to explain to voters the potential cost of independence," he writes. "Jacques Parizeau [leader of the Parti Québécois], wearing his Tinker Bell suit, actually told a group of Université de Montréal students that independence

would not cost a cent and, instead of heaving him out the window, the students clapped hands to show that they believed in fairies."

Richler documents well the absurdities and costs of language laws. Montreal will next year replace 11,000 "Stop / Arrét" signs with ones that say "Arrét" only at a cost of $60,000, he writes. But that may be a small cost when compared with the loss of English-owned businesses and thousands of fed-up English-speaking residents moving to Ontario or elsewhere. And perhaps most worrisome, he writes, are the fervid foundations of a Quebec independence drive that in October 1988, for example, saw 25,000 Québécois nationalists in the street shouting *"Le Québec aux Québécois!"* or, "Quebec for Quebecers."

"After all is said and done, I sometimes fear that I may have missed the point about Quebec's independence," he writes. "Possibly it's a mistake to try to sink with logic an ideological boat that is floated not on rational argument, but on turbulent seas of emotion." ■