

April 30, 2001

## No Sitting on the Fence

BRENDA BRANSWELL in Quebec City

Philippe Duhamel stood well back from the clouds of tear gas that drifted towards the sea of protesters in Quebec City. "For me, it's unfolding a bit like sheet music," said the soft-spoken activist of the escalating clash between police and protesters at the Summit of the Americas. As 34 leaders gathered for hemispheric free-trade talks, agitators lobbed chunks of concrete over the security perimeter while police fired back with tear gas. Duhamel belongs to SalAMI, a Montreal-based group that opposes corporate globalization and is committed to nonviolent action. It had no hand in organizing the tense protest on Friday, but Duhamel could have guessed the outcome. "Everything that is happening is predictable," he said. "You could see it coming."

So could everyone else, from wary politicians to uneasy local residents. Given the turbulent protests at previous trade meetings, police mounted the most elaborate security operation in Canadian history, assigning 6,000 officers to the event and installing a controversial chain-link fence to keep the protesters far from the meeting. Provocation or necessity? At the very least, overkill, said some protesters. A hostile throng wasted no time breaking down a small section of the fence on Friday—even as one young American woman plaintively called out, "This is a peaceful protest." Not for long.

For the protesters, the fence was another symbol of exclusion from the negotiations for a proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas. Ironically, the dissent easily eclipsed the official event, where leaders also discussed hemispheric concerns. Prime Minister Jean Chretien opened Saturday's session with a warning to delegates to protect democracy and ensure that governments listen to all voices. Outside the perimeter, some protesters gathered for a peaceful demonstration, while others again turned to violence.

Many student protesters simply stressed the need for fair trade. Articulate, earnest and organized, they are concerned that corporate interests will supersede environmental concerns and human rights in any hemispheric free-trade zone. And they came prepared—with goggles, surgical masks and vinegar-soaked scarves to protect them against tear gas. In a high-tech age of dissidence, some shared information over cellphones. Others seized the opportunity for individual expression: many banged on makeshift drums made from water containers. One young woman standing on a ledge near the perimeter yelled out: "If you're opposed to the FTAA, take one step towards me!"

No one budged. When violence finally did break out, police blamed most of it on a small group of anarchists from the loosely organized Black Bloc, who typically wear black and sport gas masks. "I'm a revolutionary and I'm here because I'm opposed to this whole system," said one. Before dashing off, he added that Black Bloc members "don't conform—we don't negotiate. We just combat them any way we can."

Then fight somewhere else—that seemed to be the message from Quebec City merchants. For them, the summit was a major nuisance. On the eve of the event, waiters stood on the steps of empty restaurants, gazing out at deserted streets. "It's a disaster," muttered Louis Laflamme, alone in his men's clothing store. Many businesses boarded up their windows. McDonald's, a popular target for anti-globalization critics, removed its sign and trademark golden arches from one restaurant. Outspoken Quebec City Mayor Jean-Paul L'Allier shared

the growing frustration of his citizens. He recently admitted that if offered the chance to host the summit now, "maybe we would not have said yes so easily." On a local level, at least, there seemed to be wide agreement that the summit could not end soon enough.

## **OUTSIDE LOOKING IN**

Sarah Blackstock is a 27-year-old with a master's degree in international politics. She works with anti-poverty groups in Toronto and believes that people can make history. This is her week in Quebec, from Monday through Saturday, April 21:

**Monday:** After months of planning, the truth is I'm feeling rather skeptical. But as I wander the streets, I'm surprised by how many people are sympathetic. A private security guard working for the summit points to the placards and flowers protesters have already placed on the security fence. "A kid could climb this," he says sheepishly.

**Tuesday:** If globalization is as inevitable as its proponents claim, why such an uproar against us irrelevant protesters? Reading the papers, I couldn't help but snicker as I made my way through all the pro-FTAA propaganda. They sound scared.

**Wednesday:** Police are out in greater force—they want us to know we are being watched. The democracy we currently have stifles our political imaginations.

**Thursday:** People are friendly, sharing food and water. Local residents come out to cheer us on. It's a party. Fantastic music keeps people dancing well into the morning.

**Friday:** I knew this was the largest police operation in Canadian history. Still, I was shocked by the force they used. It didn't take long for a part of the wall to go down. We weren't close enough to see exactly what was going on, but while we were still sussing out the situation the police fired tear gas. Then to our right, we noticed two lines of police moving in. To our left, the police drove two gigantic trucks right through the crowd. There didn't seem to be any way out. Finally, one small street opened up. Out of the zone, everything was eerily quiet. Activists and residents both seemed to be in states of shock and fear.

**Saturday:** All the labour activists are coming in today for their march. I'm off tonight. The labour buses are all planning to leave this afternoon. For most of us, that's it.

## **INSIDE LOOKING OUT**

Barbara McDougall, a senior minister in the government of Brian Mulroney, now heads the Canadian Institute for International Affairs. She participated in the summit, making a presentation at one of the forums.

**Friday:** The Sixties live! We are trapped in a small lounge at the airport, unable to start for the city because, we are told, the perimeter has been breached. We rush to one of the two televisions but cannot see much but a lot of milling about in clouds of tear gas.

Time passes. One of our party is watching Top Gun on the other TV. Suddenly, 2 1/2 hours later, we are off. From our minivan we see little of the fence. The police in their spaceman outfits look BIG. We enter the conference centre through the back door. None of the four leaders who speak talk in platitudes. In the front row, Quebec Premier Bernard Landry is clearly chafing.

Later, we stop for dinner at Cafe de la Paix. One table is occupied. As we leave, security tells us there is trouble again at the perimeter. We can smell the tear gas.

**Saturday:** Business roundtable in the Chateau Frontenac all morning. Thoughtful discussion among participants from Colombia, Dominican Republic and Costa Rica among others on how to achieve a connected hemisphere. All seem eager to move ahead.

I feel like I'm in a cocoon. The few glances I've had out the window show empty streets bathed in sunshine, boarded-up shop windows. No horses and caleches. Just the spaceman cops. It's 11 years since Canada took its seat at the Organization of American States. I was there then, in Santiago, Chile, and the growth and change in these hemispheric countries have been exciting to see. I fervently hope something comes of this.

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