

The Twilight's Last Screeching

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

Like many other cynical pragmatists, I don't like singing. Singing around the campfire, singing in the shower, singing on stage—it all seems like a waste. Why expend valuable energy trilling about how the fire's burning (of course it's burning, that's what makes it a fire, for God's sake) when you could be roasting marshmallows instead? Why croon on and on about Argentina crying when you could convey the same message with a couple lines of prose and be done with it?

Given my lack of enthusiasm for song, you'd think the last thing that I would care about is national anthems. And generally it is. Watching o'er ramparts, stripes and stars gallantly streaming—it's heartening stuff, but in its musical form, I'm happy to leave it for the perfectly pitched patriots in my midst.

And yet, I can't help but feel decidedly peeved by the growing movement in Washington to decree that "The Star Spangled Banner" be sung only in English.

It's not like I'm convinced the song would benefit from a translation into Esperanto or anything. It sounds just fine the way it is. And besides, I'd truly pity the poor soul who got stuck with the task of trying to make *ondi* (wave) rhyme with *kuragxa* (brave), never mind figuring out how to say "Play ball!" in the world's least successful language experiment.

But since when do we need a voice from on high (in this case, a voice sounding distinctly like Sen. Lamar Alexander's) dictating how to sing the national anthem? What will they want next? To fine anyone who sings it in the wrong key? (It's said that the tune is way easier to pull off in G major.) Or to jail the next stand-up comedian who makes a "Jose can you see?" joke?

No, of course not, because the English Anthem movement is really not about the Anthem per se. It's merely a panicked response to the release of a provocative Spanish version of "The Star Spangled Banner" just before last spring's immigration protests.

For the record, I don't generally like protests any more than I like musicals. Both involve too much singing. And really, what's not to hate about any event that precipitates the formation of a "human chain of solidarity" and spontaneous pub-

lic drum playing, as the immigration demonstrations apparently did?

Despite their undeniably irritating ways, however, the immigration protestors could not have been all wrong. There is, indeed, something seriously amiss when a free country thinks that it has to pass laws about what language its citizens should vocalize in.

This is not only an overestimate of the power of song—even if every American mother started singing "Frère Jacques" to her children, the U.S. population would not suddenly turn into baguette-loving, beret-wearing Frenchmen—but also an underestimate of the power of markets and commerce to shape culture.

Sen. Alexander, and even President Bush, seems to be worried that without legislation declaring English supreme, Americans (and particularly Hispanics) will either stop speaking it or never bother to start. Indeed, many would charge Mr. Bush himself with the latter offense, but that's another story.

In fact, because English remains the language of international commerce—or, in other words, the language of making a living and putting food on the table—the majority of the country are going to keep learning it and jabbering

away in it, no matter what language they may use for singing their lullabies, campfire tunes, or anthems, and no matter what tongue Washington tells them they should be using.

Most Americans understand that it was ambitious and fearlessly entrepreneurial immigrants who helped form the country's character.

No one told these people that they were required to speak (or sing) English. It was something they did because they had to, in order to feed their families and make better lives for themselves.

Except for the pernicious influence of government welfare programs and social assistance, which block healthy incentives for immigrants to assimilate and find their own way, the same is true today. Look at it this way: I'm pretty sure that successful Colombian pop singer Shakira didn't record her last couple albums in English because Lamar Alexander told her to.

If politicians don't like hearing "The Star Spangled Banner" sung in Spanish or any other non-English language, they should do as I do when confronted with a frightening Andrew Lloyd Webber creation: invest in a quality pair of earplugs. They're more effective than legislation. **R**



Marni Soupcoff is a member of the *National Post* editorial board and a Toronto-based journalist. She is a former Institute for Justice staff attorney.

KEVIN TUMA