

Forgive Kamala Harris for downplaying the formative years she spent in Montreal. She has an election to win

Harris spent five crucially important years, age 12 to 17, in this country. It was the era of Pierre Trudeau and René Lévesque, whose separatist Parti Québécois had just been elected in November 1976. She must have formed ideas about all this that would later evolve into positions on social discord, radical change, democratic reform, linguistic rights, the power of the ballot box.

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Kamala Harris is top centre in a human pyramid of FACES students. The photo was taken on McGill Campus in 1978. Top row, left to right: Cindy Garmaise, Kamala Harris, Kimberley MacKenzie. In the middle row, far right is Vicky Compton. Behind the pyramid, just below Harris is Nicholas Simmons.

Vicky Compton/Facebook

By Janice Kennedy, Contributor

Smart kids are like sponges. Even as teenagers in worlds both insular and impenetrable, smart kids soak up everything around them.

So, when Kamala Harris, United States presidential candidate and historic smart kid, brushes off the five years she lived in Canada as little more than a time of lonely yearning for home, it's difficult to believe.

Besides, that smile doesn't lie.

The trademark smile Harris wears today (driving Donald Trump nuts) seems genuine and joy-filled. But it's nothing new. It's visible in all kinds of pictures of her in Montreal. There she is, grinning and athletic, atop a human pyramid of Grade 8 classmates in 1978 at her alternative intermediate school. With friends at Westmount High, where she helped start a dance club, she's beaming. And her Class of '81 grad photo is the kind most of us would have killed for.

Images of a teenage Harris shine with enthusiasm, confidence and apparent happiness.

Sure, she may have missed her native Oakland. But she also embraced the fun and vibrancy of her second home in Montreal.

You can imagine her zipping around town with friends on the Metro, hanging out after school at the Alexis Nihon Plaza near Westmount High, taking in the nighttime city from Mount Royal's lookout. Maybe she was one of the cool kids at "Rocky Horror Picture Show" screenings. La Ronde amusement park might have been as much a springtime ritual as the Montreal Canadiens' Stanley Cup parades of 1977-79, which caused mass outbreaks of skipped classes.

The picture of a miserable teenage kid named Kamala just doesn't compute.

But it's easy to see why the narrative has been edited, since so many Americans like their politicians free of foreignness. Remember when 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry had to [pretend he didn't speak French?](#)

The MAGA crowd seems particularly hostile to "Soviet Canuckistan," ready to denounce even the most moderate Canadian social policy as "communist." And when JD (a.k.a. Shady) [Vance recently observed that Harris "grew up in Canada,"](#) it was meant to disparage.

But I mean, Canada? With its globally stereotypical niceness?

Gov. Tim Walz of Minnesota, where "Minnesota Nice" is sometimes called "Canada Lite," has injected a version of Canadian-style niceness into the Harris campaign, and it's a smash hit.

Still, given the electoral climate, tactical silence about the Montreal years is forgivable.

But the reality is, Harris spent five crucially important years, age 12 to 17, in this country. "You can never get away from where you've been," wrote Margaret Atwood, and Harris can never entirely get away from the complicated legacy of Montreal at that time.

It was the era of Pierre Trudeau and René Lévesque, whose separatist Parti Québécois had just been [elected in November 1976](#). Like all Montrealers, Harris lived through the divisiveness and unrest engendered by the PQ's historic language legislation, followed by its first separation referendum in 1980.

Even teenagers caught up in their own whirlwinds couldn't ignore the tensions. Harris lived comfortably in English Montreal, its English speakers greater in number than all of Oakland. So, she must have wondered about the bizarrely taped-over English words on storefronts, and retail giants like Eaton's and Steinberg's that dumped their apostrophes overnight.

In the spring of 1980, posters for the Oui (to separation) and Non were plastered everywhere, and every second person wore a button — most, in her part of the city, declaring "Mon NON est Québécois." As a smart kid encouraged by her mother to be socially engaged, she must have formed ideas about all this, ideas that would later evolve into positions on social discord, radical change, democratic reform, linguistic rights, the power of the ballot box.

With her scientist mother teaching at McGill University's med school and working in research at the prestigious Jewish General Hospital, where she remained for 16 years, Harris would have understood that universal health care could be effective (at least back then). In her Canadian teenage world, guns were not totemic. "Niceness" informed government policy. Labels like "progressive" and "liberal" were tributes, not taunts.

Without question, Harris is deeply, passionately American, her rooted beliefs the backbone of her 2019 memoir, "The Truths We Hold." And she has an election to win.

So, we Canadians will harbour no hurt feelings about the strategic amnesia surrounding her Montreal years. But this we know whether or not she admits it: this woman who may soon occupy the Oval Office has a nice little sliver of Canada lodged deep in her soul.

We just won't tell anyone.

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