

Quebec in Flux – The Roots of the Separatist Movement

Mssr. Lucien Bouchard and Jacques Parizeau are on a campaign trail to convince Quebecers to vote for separation from Canada. Both want an independent Quebec but they can't agree on how and when to achieve their objective.

The Quebec separatist movement is not peculiarly Canadian. Nationalism has been a powerful force in the political, cultural, and economic life of Western Europe and the Western hemisphere since the late 18th century. In 1848 it spread to central Europe. Some decades later it came to eastern Europe and Asia, and finally in the mid-twentieth century to Africa. Nationalism has become a global motivating force. It has a great impact on every individual in modern society. In its name terrorist acts have been applauded, property destroyed and resources plundered. In post-communist Soviet Union, ethnic nationalism and regionalism have led to bloodshed. Futurist Alvin Tofler sees a "resurgence of flag-waving xenophobia" – a hatred of foreigners in the United States. And Ultra-nationalism is spreading in Japan.

Looking Back

Quebec has a long history of separatist feeling. The Roman Catholic Church tried to identify itself with and to shape the nationalism and nation life of Quebec. In a Saint-Jean Baptiste Day speech in 1889, Honore Mercier described a French-Canadian nation within America. "This province of Quebec," he declared, "is Catholic and French. and it will remain Catholic and French... We are now two and a half million French Canadians in America, proud of our past, strong in our present, and confident of our future." Today, Quebec is still mainly French, but the Catholic Church no longer has a stronghold on the population.

One of the remarkable stories in post-World War II Canada is Quebec's Quiet Revolution. The call for an independent Quebec is now based on economic and linguistic distinctives and no longer on its Roman Catholic heritage. Attendance at mass has plummeted. The Roman Catholic Church and its institutions are roundly criticized. In 1964 it lost control of the schools when a provincial Ministry of Education was created. A nationalist movement, the Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale (RIN), attracted radical young separatists to the leadership of Marcel Chaput, who had declared that "history intended that North America have an independent French-speaking country. Separation from Canada would complete Quebec's natural destiny. French president Charles de Gaulle's 1967 visit (1890-1970) to Quebec put oil on the separatist fires when he publicly called for a "free Quebec." De Gaulle was a fervent nationalist. He didn't believe in integration and supranationality. He was convinced that France had a mission. He had an aversion to the "Anglo-Saxons" whom he felt had usurped the place of cultural leadership rightfully belonging to France.

The Quiet Revolution was not always so quiet. The angriest separatists joined the militant Front Liberation du Quebec (FLQ). They stole dynamite and placed it in the mailboxes in the wealthy section of Montreal where the English lived. There were

terrorist acts, a kidnapping and even a murder. Separatists no longer mentioned the church. They appealed instead to Marxist, socialist and other ideologies.

In November, 1976, the separatist Parti Quebecois swept to power under the leadership of Rene Levesque. A subdued English Canada reacted with mixed emotions. Suddenly in Ottawa, millions of dollars became available for unity campaigns, unity celebrations on Parliament Hill, and television spectacles. All the while Quebecers kept asking why it is all right to be a Canadian nationalist worried about American domination, but it is not all right to worry about English domination. Why not an independent nation? During their years in power the PQ sought political independence from and an economic association with Canada. That option was lost in the 1980 referendum. The proposal to secede was rejected by a margin of 60 to 40 percent.

The post-referendum years have not brought political peace. The Meech Lake Accord, which would have amended the constitution to accommodate Quebec, was defeated through the national referendum. The Hon. Eugene Forsey suggests that Quebec should be guaranteed a minimum proportion of seats in the Senate and the House of Commons, and, as there is now, a minimum proportion of the judges of the Supreme Court. But many federalists in English-speaking Canada are no longer in the mood to accommodate Quebec.

Looking Ahead

Whither Quebec? The Quiet Revolution created a spiritual vacuum which many have tried to fill with economic, linguistic, and cultural nationalism, a new religion. One of its "feathers" was Jean Jacques Rousseau. He followed the example of Plato and of all passions and stressing the distinctive self-being and self-centeredness of each people. In 1765 and in 1771, he appealed to the need of a fervent nationalism as the essential basis of the moral democratic renewal of a people and of the age. Rousseau expressed the conviction that sovereignty and government are not the King's but the peoples, the common men who form the nation. He taught that their consent legitimizes government, and that they have the aptitude and the right to take national destiny into their hands. Rousseau's philosophy strongly influenced the spirit of the French Revolution.

Nationalism becomes irrationalism when it requires its followers to sacrifice everything family, fortune, even life itself – for the good of the state if necessary. Nationalism is idolatry if it takes the place of God in the heart of man; a religion replacing Christianity. As David Atkinson put it, "Nationhood is part of the richness of God's providential ordering of his world. But nationhood is not absolute. When nationhood becomes absolute principle, it becomes demonic."

Whether the PQ party will win the referendum remains to be seen. The polls indicate that the results will be the same as in 1980. But even if the majority of the Quebecers decide to stay in Canada, the separatists won't give up trying. They are religiously committed to their cause.

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