Quebec always did set the mood for Canada. Now it can call the plays

Quebec’s Politics of Vengeance

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The victory of the separatist Parti Québécois (P.Q.) on November 15, 1976, set off the liveliest public debate in Canadian history. For the first time since Confederation the unity of the country is seriously threatened.

After the election the Toronto Globe and Mail made a cool analysis of the situation and concluded that the P.Q. victory “leaves us with no excuse for failure to recognize that this country is in great danger.” Donald Creighton, dean of Canadian historians, stated bluntly that the country now faces “division and possible ruin.”

No one doubts that the dangers are well founded. The P.Q. was formed in 1967 for the express purpose of establishing political sovereignty in Quebec. René Lévesque, the dynamic and tough-minded leader of the party, has declared on numerous occasions that independence is “an absolute necessity.” His government has already issued guidelines for a referendum and set the fall of 1979 for the first vote.

What Quebec wants is clear to everyone. More puzzling is why they want it. Everywhere the question is asked: Why does Quebec want out? What do they hope to gain?

The separatist argument runs on two threads—one historical, the other economic. In many ways the historical argument is the most compelling for French Canadians. Canada was originally ours, they argue. We lost it to the British in 1759. It is now time to take it back, at least that part of it that has been for centuries our home.

The motto of Quebec is je me souviens—I remember. French Canadians remember the days when Canada was French. For some 150 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock they had been on the North American continent. By 1759, when the French forces under Montcalm were defeated by General Wolfe in the battle of the Plains of Abraham, they had built durable ele-

ments of a cultural identity. They had a language, a religion, sturdy social institutions, and a concentrated population.

But they especially remember the long pain of defeat, the economic deprivations and the humiliation of being considered second rate in their own land. From the French Canadian point of view the Confederation of 1867 has always been an uneasy marriage of convenience. The French and English, Lévesque says in one of the earthy images he is fond of, are like a married couple who can no longer sleep in the same bed.

This memory has served as the catacombs of their nationalistic spirit. It has been carefully preserved from generation to generation—handed on by the clergy, by writers and artists, by educators and politicians, and has by now become an indivisible part of their folklore. In Maria Chapdelaine, one of the classics of French Canadian literature, a character sums up the Quebec mentality in these words:

Strangers have taken all the power and have acquired nearly all the wealth. But in the country of Quebec nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change for we are its witness. We have clearly, understood what our duty is to ourselves and to our destiny: to hold fast, to endure so that, it may be, many centuries hence the world will look upon us and say: These people are of a race that knows not how to perish.

This almost mythic backdrop to the present separatist movement gives it a strong emotional undertow that few outsiders can grasp.

A second, more practical, argument advanced by the separatists is an economic one. Since the Conquest, they say, Quebeckers have been treated like a colonial people, exploited first by the English, then by the English Canadians, and most recently by the Americans. Quebec has supplied the
resources and cheap labor, but the profits have gone elsewhere.

In an article in Foreign Affairs (July, 1976) René Lévesque wrote:

More than half of our public revenue, and most of the decisions that count were and are in outside hands, in a federal establishment which was basically instituted not by or for us, but by others and, always first and foremost, for their own purposes. About 80 percent of Quebec savings and potential investment capital end up in the banks and insurance companies whose operations are none of our business.

These and similar charges are by and large true. For a long time Montreal was the financial capital of Canada. But big business was tightly controlled by Anglophones. Few French Canadians ever made it to the top. In many cases French Canadians have difficulty getting hired at all. For example, the asbestos mines in the southeastern part of the province employ some 300,000 workers, of whom only 5,000 are Francophone.

The economic problem is now compounded by the fact that the financial center has shifted from Montreal to Toronto and the west. The separatists point out that this shift is a logical and unfair consequence of federalist policies, which have always favored the Anglophones. The economic decline began with the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway, which enabled the sea-going trade to bypass Montreal. In 1959, according to the Financial Times, new industrial investments in Toronto were only 55 percent of the Montreal total. Less than ten years later the ratio had been drastically reversed and investments in Toronto were 165 percent of the Montreal total. That trend has continued unabated.

The Quebec economy suffered other blows as well. The discovery of oil in Alberta hurt its refinery industry. Ontario developed lucrative mining and was virtually the sole beneficiary of the auto pact with Detroit. Moreover, federal policies favoring the prairie provinces prevented the development of a grain and beef industry in Quebec. As a consequence most research and development monies are now directed outside of Quebec.

Some of Quebec’s economic woes are of its own doing. It is the most highly taxed province in Canada and also has one of the highest rates of unemployment. Expensive projects like the James Bay hydroelectric development, Expo 67, and more recently the Olympics have made heavy drains on the economy. Its numerous social welfare programs have also been costly. In addition, the P.Q. government has aggravated business with some highly controversial legislation: an antiscab law that prevents companies from replacing striking workers, a provision (known in Canada as the Rand formula) that obliges workers to pay union dues even if they don’t belong, and, above all, a recently passed language policy that is the P.Q.’s most radical move to date.

Bill 101, as it is called, appeared as a white paper on April 1, 1977, was hotly debated over the summer months, and was eventually passed by the Quebec legislature on August 26 by a vote of 54 to 32. The bill stipulates that French is to be the official language of the
province—the language of government (central and local), of the courts, of industry, labor and commerce, of education and communications, of place names, street signs, and advertising. Bill 101 is in violation of the spirit if not the letter of the Canadian Constitution as well as of the Official Languages Act of 1968.

The P.Q. justifies its language policy on four grounds: First, the birthrate is falling in Quebec (it was one of the lowest in Canada last year) and this makes Francophones vulnerable to assimilation; Second, new immigrants to Quebec show a marked preference for becoming part of the Anglophone community (by forcing them to go to French schools, the government hopes to reverse this tendency). Third, by making French the compulsory working language of business, the economic interests by French Canadians will be protected. Finally, Bill 101 is inspired by the belief that the federal policy of bilingualism means in practice the predominance of English. Our aim, says Camille Laurin, P.Q. minister for Cultural Development and chief architect of the bill, is “to make Quebec as French as Ontario is English.”

Generally speaking, Francophones have reacted favorably to Bill 101, while Anglophones have been highly incensed. But Francophone opinion is not unanimous. Claude Ryan, a Francophone despite his Irish name and editor of the influential newspaper Le Devoir, faults it on at least three grounds. First of all, he says, its treatment of the Anglophone minority is unnecessarily draconian, especially in regard to education. The bill permits only children of now-resident English-speaking parents to send their children to English schools. All immigrants to the province, even those from other Canadian provinces, must send their children to French-language schools. Ryan, like others, thinks this is discriminatory and a violation of freedom of choice.

There is an even more serious problem in the question of the courts. By making French the only official language of law, it is almost certainly unconstitutional.

Third, says Ryan, by insisting too shrilly that French be the language of business, Francophones may be cutting their own throats. To begin with, he states, this ignores a substantial minority that has a right to be served in its own language (13 per cent of the Quebec population is English-speaking, but in the Montreal area it is closer to 40 per cent). Moreover, Bill 101 is provoking an economic backlash. Since last November some 118 firms and about forty thousand English-speaking residents have rolled out of Quebec. “The province is on the verge of possibly the greatest exodus in its history,” proclaimed an article in the June 25 edition of the Montreal Star.

Despite all signs to the contrary, the P.Q. has steadfastly maintained that an independent Quebec would be economically viable. That the province has all the human and material resources necessary for independence. Separatists are prepared for a difficult period of transition and are even resigned to suffering a lower standard of living for a time. But they view these short-run sacrifices in light of the long-run gain of controlling their own economic development. In Canada, they point out, the economic lines run as much north and south as east and west. While American investors would be jittery for the transitional period, it is not expected that they will turn their backs on profit-making opportunities in Quebec indefinitely. After eliminating the federal middle man, Quebec can deal with American and other investors on its own terms. “In a country that was supposedly founded on the dignity of the person,” says Lévesque, “it is no longer conceivable that the economy of Quebec should be geared to the advantage of outsiders.”

Minister Camille Laurin makes no apologies for what he has wrought. Anglophone business leaders, he says, should “react in an adult and dynamic way to the necessary loss of privileges. They should begin to view themselves as a minority and not as the Quebec wing of the Anglo-Canadian majority.” He took an active part in the debates over Bill 101, listening courteously to over a hundred briefs from citizen groups but rarely compromising his stand, and then only on minor points. It is coercive, he admits. It has to be. Invited to address an association of Montreal businessmen in English, he chose instead to speak in French. If I spoke English, he explained, it would only confirm the already widespread impression that English is the appropriate language of business.

This is precisely the attitude “that in the past has caused much grief and bitterness on the part of French Canadians,” Laurin went on. “It made them feel they were strangers in a strange land, whereas Quebec is in fact their own country.” Laurin, who was a psychiatrist before he turned to politics, believes this is why Quebeckers suffer from a chronic sense of insecurity and why Bill 101 will redress long-standing wrongs.

The language policy is widely viewed in Canada as part of the strategy of separation. The P.Q. game plan seems to be, first, to secure the language and bolster a beleaguered French Canadian culture and, second, to call a referendum on separation. Then, only if and when this is won, can economic and other social problems be properly attended to. The separatists adopt the somewhat odd view that economics is a function of culture rather than the other way round.

There have been separatist movements in Quebec since the 1880’s, and it was only a matter of time before a separatist party came to power. The principal reason why that time is now rather than later is largely due to the charismatic leadership of René Lévesque. “He is on the same wave length as the people,” says a close friend. “That is why he has been chosen as the midwife of our destiny.”

Like many political leaders, Lévesque is something of a paradox. He is an idealist as well as a pragmatist; highly intelligent but not an intellectual; sophisticated and at the same time capable of disarming with a peasant-like simplicity. Physically he is rather small of frame but radiates a superabundant energy. His sleepy, untidy appearance conceals a highly organized and active mind.

René Lévesque was born on August 24, 1922, in the small town of New Carlisle on Quebec’s Gaspé coast. He was a Francophone in a predominantly English-speaking sector. Fist fights with young Anglophones were part of
Lévesque: "I am a Quebecker first, a French Canadian second, and I really have... well, no sense at all of being Canadian."

In 1960 he began his career in politics.

It is important to understand the mental universe that motivated Lévesque's plunge into politics. From 1936 to 1959 Quebec was under the tutelage of the wily Maurice Duplessis, one of the long line of "Negro kings" (as they are now contemptuously referred to) who played the federalist game and enlisted the Church's help to keep Quebeckers in line. "My generation cursed the Duplessis regime," Lévesque recalls bitterly. "It was a damned generation that had no say whatsoever in the public life of Canada. Now I am where things will be decided, when they are decided."

The Liberal party under Jean Lesage took over from Duplessis's Union Nationale in 1960. A new day was dawning in Quebec. Exciting things were about to happen and Lévesque wanted to be part of the action. These were the years of what has since become known as Quebec's "quiet revolution." Lesage's government is credited with two major accomplishments: It wrested considerable power from the traditionally strong Church (principally in matters of education) and from the federal government in Ottawa (principally more power to determine the fiscal resources of the province). And for the first time in its history the Quebec government was manned by able and professional technocrats with degrees in the social sciences from prestigious schools like the London School of Economics and the Harvard Business School.

Lévesque held several portfolios in the Lesage government. He was, in turn, minister of public works, social assistance, and natural resources (in the latter capacity he was the prime mover behind the nationalization of the province's hydroelectric companies). Separatist sentiment was growing in these years as well, and Lévesque was in the forefront of those demanding greater autonomy for Quebec.

By mid-decade, however, the lustre of the Lesage regime was wearing off. When the Liberals lost to Duplessis's old Union Nationale in 1966, Lévesque broke with the party. He left charging that the Liberals too had begun to play the familiar role of Negro king. He joined forces with the separatist movement and in 1967 he founded the Parti Québécois. The P.Q. was defeated in the provincial elections of 1970 and 1973, but they were victorious in 1976. Once again René Lévesque was the star of his own show.

Lévesque's avowed aim is to take Quebec out of the "creaky old double bed of Confederation." As he told a Toronto audience, "I sometimes find it hard to understand my French compatriots. But I understand the English damn well. They are poaching on our turf, a minority dominating a majority. The Confederation was created by the English for the English in order to head off an American invasion. Today the Confederation is seen in Quebec as a small sailor's suit on a grown child. We want to finish our quiet revolution." And he told the same audience: "I am a Quebecker first, a French Canadian second, and I really have...well, no sense at all of being a Canadian."

One cannot help detecting in such a posture the memory of Lévesque's childhood experience, the little French boy battling against odds with the English kids. Vengeance seems to be the key to his political personality as well as that of his party. The P.Q. practices a primitive kind of politics that rests upon a consistent attitude of defiance as the precondition of policy, a politics constituted essentially by the clash of wills.

There are no sure signs at this point that the separatist cause would carry a referendum. Polls indicate that separatism per se does not have majority support. But separation plus economic association with the rest of Canada is acceptable to about 65 percent of the people in Quebec. Most Quebeckers I talked to are more interested in jobs than independence, although they would like to have both. Much depends, then, on how the issue is stage-managed and how the question is eventually put to the electorate. The P.Q. can be counted on to play its cards carefully. Moreover, Lévesque and his men are proven manipulators of public opinion. After all, they campaigned on the issue of good government, not separatism. The fact that they now give first importance to the latter is understandably regarded by many as dirty politics.

English Canadians are overwhelmingly against separation, and there is a general, if vague, hope that the Quebec problem can be settled through negotiation. This
would involve a major rewriting of the Canadian Constitution, sweeping changes in federal economic policies, and extensive concessions to Quebec across the board—concessions that cautious Anglophones are reluctant to make. They reject, for example, the idea of an economic association (whatever form that might take). Quebeckers can't have their cake and eat it too, they charge; they can't break up the unity of the country and at the same time expect to benefit economically. Federalists assume that the strongest economic arguments favor their position. In the long pull, they think, the prospect of economic reprisals will cow Quebec into remaining within the Confederation.

This is perhaps an unwarranted assumption. Separatist economists make a good case for the opposite point of view. In any event, economic threats would be a poor basis for negotiation. As Peter Newman, editor of Macleans magazine and a staunch supporter of Canadian unity, points out, "It would be an error of monumental proportions for the federal government to cut Quebec out of its capital investment plans. Economic retaliation just won't work."

But it is by no means certain that other forms of negotiation will work either. The tough question that beggars this approach is: How far would the federal government have to go to satisfy Quebec? The P.Q. is simply not interested in negotiations. The politics of vengeance rules out a common ground of agreement from the start. Quebec could, if it so chose, simply declare independence, much as the Americans did in 1776. In such an event there would be little the federal government could do short of an armed intervention, and no one believes that is likely.

Without Quebec, Canada's chances for survival as a nation are slim. The fact is, Canada has never been a very unified country. It has been and remains a fragile Confederation. The Maritime provinces, largely abandoned on the rugged Atlantic coast, have never felt themselves a real part of Canada. British Columbia, separated from the rest of the country by the Rocky Mountains, has strong historical ties with the United States. Ontario has an identity and spirit of its own. So too do the prairie provinces. If Quebec secedes, an already tenuous unity would probably snap.

I think Peter Newman put it exactly right. "Quebec has always set the cultural tone of Canada," he told me. "Now it commands our political mood as well. The problem of Canadian unity rests with the French. Only in Quebec has there grown a spirit of self-determination, an interior kind of romantic mythology which eventually translated itself into political power. The Quebec revolution proved that a vibrant politics requires a vibrant culture." On this reasoning Canada needs Quebec more than Quebec needs Canada.

However one regards the matter, Quebec is in a politically powerful position today, capable of demanding and getting virtually anything it wants. Whether it will want wisely or not, with the good of the whole country in mind, remains to be seen, although this appears improbable at the moment. Meanwhile, the separatist challenge places a great burden on Pierre Trudeau's government in Ottawa. So far Trudeau has adopted a largely rhetorical and defensive posture toward Quebec. He categorically opposes separation and has appointed numerous task forces to study the problem of national unity. But to date he has not been very specific about how he intends to deal with it. He will no doubt clarify his position to some extent in the upcoming federal elections, which will probably be called within the year. But it would be unrealistic to expect Trudeau or anyone else to come up with a solution to the Quebec problem. At best, Canada will be a divided country for a long time to come.

In 1945 Canadian novelist Hugh MacLennan published a widely read study of the French-English problem entitled Two Solitudes. MacLennan saw no solution then, and there appears to be none now. I came away with the conviction that the "two solitudes" are virtually unbridgeable. The difficulties of trying to communicate across centuries of pentup hostilities and misunderstandings are enormous. As the debate over separation wears on, positions are hardening. Anglophones say the French are overstating their case, that they dream of a Quebec that can never exist in the modern world. The French, for their part, stress the accumulated injustices and rejection they have suffered at the hands of the English. And they remember—with a memory that winds back over their past to the time of their beginnings and encircles their ethnic consciousness like the Midgard serpent, isolating it from a common ground of dialogue.

The debate seems to have become, as a reporter for the Montreal Gazette wrote, "a dialogue of the deaf."