

Is Quebec's Call for Sovereignty Still a Vibrant Force Today?

Written by Howard Cody

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HOWARD CODY, SEP 15 2012

As an 83% French-speaking province in mostly English-speaking Canada, Quebec has long affirmed a unique identity. For sovereigntists, Quebecers can honor their distinctiveness only as a formally independent country. The Parti Quebecois (PQ) has advanced a sovereigntist platform since its founding in 1968. In September 2012 it won a provincial election to take power for the third time; its first electoral success had occurred in 1976. Each time the PQ has promised a referendum to take the province out of Canada. The first two referenda, both on "soft" questions soliciting a popular mandate to negotiate sovereignty including an economic association with Canada, failed to pass. But the second vote, in October 1995, came within a percentage point of success. The current Quebec PQ government, under Pauline Marois, the province's first female premier, is promoting a third referendum. Marois lacks a majority in Quebec's National Assembly (provincial legislature). She will face obstacles to implementing her agenda. Moreover, current polls put support for sovereignty near 30%, and opposition to a third referendum close to 70% (Gagnon 2012). There is little likelihood of Quebec sovereignty in the near future, but Quebec's assertive nationalism will remain a vibrant force indefinitely.

Historical Background

As New France, Quebec embodied French civilization in North America from the early seventeenth century until the British Conquest in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). To this day Quebecers and English Canadians disagree on the pivotal 1759 Plains of Abraham battle that helped seal New France's fate (Ignatieff 2007: 25). Quebecers' enduring victimology, with its "old memories of hurts and slights" dates from that time and the imposition of British rule (Ignatieff 2007: 39-40). Always a minority in British North America and in the subsequent Dominion of Canada, French Roman Catholic Quebecers made linguistic and cultural survival their prime objective. One popular device to ensure survival has been a dualist interpretation of Canada's 1867 Confederation, which Henri Bourassa described a century ago as a "contract between the two races in Canada, French and English, based on equality and recognizing equal rights and reciprocal duties" (Bourassa 1969: 141). Further, Quebecers have long sought formal constitutional recognition of their unique nation in Canada. In practice this requires that they enjoy an official status different from Canada's nine other provinces (McRoberts 1997, 245-276; Taylor 1993: 191-195).

Partly because most English Canadians have rejected Bourassa's binationalism and have resisted granting Quebec a special status, and more so because the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s replaced the Church with the Quebec state as French Quebecers' prime object of allegiance, the sovereignty movement arose in this period with the argument that only an assertive sovereign Quebec state can articulate, protect and advance Quebecers' aspirations. Sovereigntists argue that Canada's federal government naturally serves the interests of the majority language group that elects three-quarters of its population-based Parliament (House of Commons) (McRoberts 2004: 409-414). Ottawa's response to Quebec's early sovereignty momentum included the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the 1987 Meech Lake constitutional accord that would have conferred official "distinct society" status on Quebec, and the 1992 Charlottetown accord that undertook a similar initiative along with various other constitutional reforms (McRoberts 2004: 415-419). But the Charter of Rights does not grant Quebec a special status. Most English Canadians rejected both the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords for giving Quebec (potentially, depending on court interpretations) unspecified asymmetric powers (Brooks 2009: 406). After both deals failed,

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Canadians outside Quebec (but not Quebecers) lost interest in pursuing constitutional change. This constitutional fatigue endures (Ibbitson 2012E). Moreover, Canada's national political parties have progressively lost their capacity to further national integration through French-English elite accommodation. This applies especially to the Liberals, who reconciled Quebec with the rest of Canada for decades with an "underlying logic of accommodativeness" (Johnston 2012: 174-175). The upshot of these developments has been a strengthening of Quebec nationalism that contributed to the strong showing for sovereignty in the 1995 referendum.

The Current Situation: Prime Minister Harper and Canada as a Whole

On the federal level, Conservative Stephen Harper of Calgary, Alberta has headed Canada's government since early 2006. Harper reflects prevailing Western perspectives on Confederation. Westerners cherish their own victimology. Many of them agree with Bourassa that Canada was founded as a dualist arrangement. Quebec and Ontario elites established Canada before the Western provinces joined Confederation. They sought to perpetuate Eastern control over Canada, secure the West's resources for themselves, and politically marginalize the West's population. Thus, for many Westerners, Canada's Confederation settlement represents "an instrument of injustice" (Morton 1980: 108; Manning 1992: 303). Harper may subscribe to this position. He has no use for the "Laurentian consensus" under which mostly Liberal Ontario and Quebec-based elites long monopolized national policymaking (Courchene 2012: 29).

Further, Harper is a disciple of fellow economist Friedrich Hayek, who extolled the virtues of the free market and limited government (Johnson 2006: 47). This argument is more popular in Alberta than elsewhere in Canada and especially in Quebec, whose residents hold ideological convictions well to the left of most other Canadians (Ornstein 1986: 78). Harper believes (or hopes) he can finesse this difficulty with his "open" federalism under which the federal government and provinces supposedly enjoy autonomy in their own jurisdictions and leave each other alone (Ibbitson 2012A). Since Canada's provinces are responsible for health, education, and other social services, as well as energy and other natural resources, Harper assures Quebec it may manage its distinct society however it wishes without federal interference. To cite one example, unlike other provinces Quebec has implemented largely publically-financed day care. Harper does not object. But pollster Andre Turcotte calls Harper's hands-off approach to Quebec "separatism by default...a marriage with separate bedrooms" that makes Canada's national government "totally irrelevant" to most Quebecers, especially young people (Ibbitson 2012A).

After two minorities, Harper secured his first majority government in May 2011 with only five MPs (Members of Parliament) elected from his party in Quebec. This outcome sent a telling signal to all Canadians, not least to Harper himself, that this Prime Minister needs little support in Quebec to win and operate a majority. His government is less popular in Quebec than elsewhere, but most Canadians evidently do not mind. Quebecers and other Canadians increasingly entertain a mutual indifference. Nearly two decades ago Michael Ignatieff observed that Quebec "has ceased to define itself in terms of Canada" (Ignatieff 1993: 123). Canadians elsewhere care little about Quebec or its aspirations. They have no desire to make concessions to keep Quebec in Canada (Simpson 2012A), particularly when they doubt that a sovereignty referendum could pass (Martin 2012). Besides, about four million mostly Asian immigrants have entered Canada in the past two decades. Most of them have settled in southern Ontario and in British Columbia's Vancouver area. They have no use for French-English dualism or for according Quebec special consideration (Ibbitson 2012C; Radwanski 2012). Entrepreneurial and socially conservative, these immigrants are gaining political influence. Many have joined Harper's electoral coalition (Ibbitson 2011). All of this paragraph's developments marginalize Quebec in the rest of Canada and in the federal government.

The Current Situation: Quebec and Its New Parti Quebecois Government

Quebec's pro-federalist Liberal Premier Jean Charest called an election for September 2012 after nine years in office. The observed "costs of ruling" gradually erode incumbents' support worldwide as "time for a change" sentiment grows (Naanstead and Paddam 2002: 17-44). This proved too much for Charest (Simpson 2012B). The Parti Quebecois won an unenthusiastic quasi-mandate with 32% of the vote and 54 of 125 National Assembly seats. (About 40% of voters supported the three sovereigntist parties.) Premier Marois' identity politics election platform was the PQ's most nationalistic yet. Marois promised that as premier she would demand complete control of

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employment insurance and communications policy (including Radio-Canada, the French language unit of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). She further proposed a "Charter of Secularism" banning the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols other than crucifixes. Marois wants to require Quebecers to speak French to run for office, make French the mandatory language in all businesses with at least ten employees, establish Quebec citizenship and issue citizenship cards to the population (which may be unconstitutional, but the Canadian constitution's "notwithstanding" clause might let her government do this anyway), and force non-English speakers (including Quebec's "allophones" of neither French nor English language origin) to attend certain French rather than English higher education institutions (Macdonald 2012). With her minority she may not pass most of this legislation. But the fact that Quebec's premier advances such policies may deter the prospective immigrants Quebec needs to offset its demographic decline from its low birth rate. The Asians who locate elsewhere in Canada could benefit the province, but few of them may find Marois' Quebec attractive (Ibbitson 2012C).

Quebec's French serve simultaneously as a small minority in North America and as a large majority in Quebec. Their situation influences their mindset and encourages insecurity, solidarity, and French-promoting language policies. Canada proclaims itself a multicultural mosaic, but Quebec's "interculturalism" more closely describes American melting-pot assimilation. Interculturalism stresses the need for immigrants to integrate into the majority secular French language and culture (Conway 2012: 198-199; Siddiqui 2012). Recent efforts to achieve a "reasonable accommodation" of Quebec's old stock and immigrant populations have highlighted a cultural divide. Quebecers' approach to rights differs from English speakers. Whereas English North Americans perceive rights procedurally, French Quebec is more concerned with substantive goals and outcomes. Specifically, how does the exercise of rights advance desired social objectives such as protection for Quebec's French secular culture (Conway 2012: 206)? Because secularism and gender equality are key components of this culture, Quebecers have difficulty accepting the Muslim veil for women and other religious customs they consider discriminatory (Conway 2012: 200-203).

Whither Quebec?

Quebec appears likely to remain a relatively autonomous province of Canada. Ned Franks' observation that Canadians' "mutually incompatible myths and symbols" represent the "greatest obstacles to seeing a future of mutual cooperation and harmony" may remain valid indefinitely (Franks 1993: 66). The costs of Quebec's secession probably would prove unacceptably high for both sides, Quebecers particularly. Current circumstances suggest that sovereignty would damage Quebec's financial position. Quebec's debt of over 50% of Gross Domestic Product is Canada's highest by far. If Quebec left Canada and assumed its share of the national debt, it would owe nearly 100% of its GDP (Ibbitson 2012D). Quebec's commitment to Canada features *federalism rentable*, meaning that Quebecers stay with Canada for fiscal transfers and financial security (LaSelva 1996: 22). Federal fiscal transfers far exceed what Quebec taxpayers send to Ottawa. For 2012-2013 they run to \$17.4 billion, which includes \$6.8 billion for health care and \$7.4 billion for equalization that let provinces below the national average in fiscal capacity provide levels of services near the national average.

Moreover, Ronald Watts warns from cross-national experience that even "friendly" breakups impose high costs as separate sets of vested interests soon arise. Most splits entail emotional heat that can take time to dissipate (Watts 1994: 193-194). Also, if a post-breakup relationship is dyadic, with two partners, the relationship becomes "invariably...zero-sum" in the absence of the "shifting alliances and coalitions" that permit multipolar associations to settle disputes (Watts 1996: 105). The disparities of a large population and wealth ratio between partners, as with Canada-Quebec, also prove problematic. They contributed to dyads' collapses in Pakistan, Malaysia-Singapore, and Czechoslovakia (Watts 1998: 382). Given all this, perhaps Quebec nationalists might pursue the progressive devolution strategy currently practiced in Scotland and Catalonia. These sovereignty-minded governments are incrementally securing more power while they maintain formal membership in their diverse countries until they can eventually stage a successful sovereignty referendum (Saunders 2012).

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