

## Trudeau's Canadian Legacy from a Quebec Perspective: New Canadian Nationalism Weakens Canada

Christian Dufour  
Ecole nationale d'administration publique,  
Université du Québec à Montréal

When ex-Prime Minister Pierre Elliott-Trudeau died in September 2000, nearly every Canadian appeared deeply moved, even those who fiercely fought Trudeau's political ideas during his lifetime: English Canadians from Ontario, but also from the West and from Quebec, Canadians from neither French or English origin and Aboriginals all over the country, French speaking Canadians outside Quebec. The emotion, the pain and the pride were sincere and surprisingly intense : everybody mourned the great Canadian man, the statesman who had changed Canada for the best forever. Everybody, except those for whom Trudeau had specifically entered Canadian politics in the first place, more than thirty years ago. The French-speaking majority of Quebec clearly stood apart from the rest of the country, respectful but silent.

Contradicting the official line over Trudeau's admirable political achievements, the clear difference in the popular reaction within and outside Quebec was the measure of Trudeau's—and contemporary Canada's—big failure: the Canadian incapacity to make French Quebec more comfortable within Canada, to integrate even the moderate, pro-Canadian aspects of Quebec nationalism. In a very real way, an old problem has been made worse, unsolved by the golden child of Québec and Canada, the most gifted politician of his generation, whom both parties had trusted to solve that problem. Instead, the legacy of Trudeau, the enemy of all nationalisms, is paradoxically a new Canadian nationalism based on the denial of the *Québécois* heart of Canada.

### The *Québécois* as the founding people of Canada

A century ago, the first French Canadian to become Prime Minister of Canada, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, exhorted the English Canadians of that time to perceive themselves less as members of the British Empire and more as Canadians, the way their French-speaking compatriots had felt themselves to be Canadians as far back as the 17th century. Now, 100 years later, a substantial number of Quebecers would like to make Quebec into an independent state, and a major-

ity of the French-speaking population no longer feels comfortable in today's Canada.

What has happened in the interim to have caused the most Canadian of all Canadians to adopt such a negative attitude toward a country that is envied the world over? There is no understanding this change if one is limited to the English Canadian vision that often is the only perspective conveyed within a country such as Britain and if one fails to consider another point of view deeply rooted in the history of Canada—that is, the vision of Canada specific to French-speaking Canadians<sup>1</sup>.

The first element of this vision, which is overlooked to a great extent abroad and to an increasing degree within Canada itself, is probably the most fundamental one. Concerning the construction of Canadian identity, French-speaking Quebecers are the first Canadians. Forget for a moment the attempts to rewrite history to suit the current fashion for political correctness. In terms of identity, there are not three, or even two founding peoples of Canada. There is only one such people, represented by the ancestors of francophone Quebecers of today. They alone called themselves *Canadiens* in the century preceding the British conquest in 1763. Throughout that time, they lived side by side with the first occupants of the land, the Aboriginal peoples, who never thought to call themselves Canadians, for the Canadianization of Amerindian identity only began around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in 1763, the *Canadiens* would be joined by British subjects, who would take more than a century to feel they were Canadians—until the late 19th century, when Laurier was Prime Minister. For more than two hundred years, during the formative years of Canadian identity, the French speaking ancestors of today's *Québécois* were the only ones to feel and call themselves Canadian.

So, in relation to Canadian identity, Quebec identity is not a phenomenon coming after, or on the margins of some other construction, as is the case with Scotland vis-à-vis Great Britain, or Slovakia vis-à-vis the former Czechoslovakia. In its French-Canadian embodiment since 1840 and its *Québécois* embodiment since 1960, the identity of Quebec francophones has, in many ways, remained the fundamental Canadian identity throughout history<sup>2</sup>. There is absolutely no understanding the profound ambivalence of Quebec francophones and their great reluctance to leave a country they feel attached to despite being increasingly marginalized within it, without also considering the farewell they will have to bid to a Canadian identity they have brought into being. All opinion polls show that the first choice of Quebecers would be a Canada where

Quebec could enjoy a particular status that took into account the fact that it is home to the only society with a French-speaking majority in North America.

### **Historical misunderstanding between Québec and Canada**

Nearly all English-Canadians seem convinced that, whatever new margin of manoeuvre is granted to Quebec—a fortiori to “separatists”—, it will inevitably play against Canada. Quebec would necessarily ask for more and more, until it leaves a country whose survival without it is improbable for geopolitical reasons. Aren't the numerous English-Canadian concessions of the last forty years, without any tangible appreciation from Quebec nationalists, a clear proof of that?

In contemporary Canada, Prime Minister Trudeau clearly bears the responsibility for this tragic misunderstanding<sup>3</sup>. On this matter, let us remember the very lucid opinion of one of the most respected and influential Canadians, one which embodied the great tradition of the Canadian civil service, Gordon Robertson. He used to be clerk of the Privy Council during Trudeau's years in power. In 1991, Mr. Robertson admitted at the Bélanger-Campeau Commission that the solemn promises made to Quebecers just before the 1980 Québec referendum had not been respected. They were not respected because the 1982 constitution bypassed what was essential to the French-speaking majority of Québec, this majority being the missing part in a constitution open to every other individual and collective difference: multicultural groups, Aboriginals, linguistic minorities and so on.

In fact, Canadian political reforms of the last thirty years systematically avoided giving to Quebec within Canada a status adapted to the modern society born from the Quiet Revolution of the Sixties. Quebecers wanted more French in the federal capital and a better treatment of neighbouring Acadians and Franco-Ontarians. They wanted the transfer to the Quebec government, the only one in Canada controlled by a French-speaking majority, of powers specifically related to the Quebec identity, considering the substantial decrease in numbers of French-speaking Canadians outside Quebec and the growing concentration of Canadian francophones in Quebec. These reasonable changes within Canada, federal Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson and Ontario Premier John Roberts, were about to agree on them. Then came Trudeau.

At the end of the Sixties, Pierre Elliott-Trudeau wasted the precious goodwill existing toward Québec in the rest of the country by not sending the right messages. Quebecers never asked for that formal bilingualism from coast to coast

that the prime minister convinced other Canadians to accept, supposedly to satisfy the French province. That was also the Meech Lake Accord tragedy. If Quebecers—the most deeply rooted Canadians—had been granted the political recognition as a people they never had within Canada, they would not have asked for more and more but played the Canadian game in a new and creative way.

### **Canada as a pact between two peoples**

The second major factor explaining the growing alienation of French-speaking Quebecers within Canada could be summarised as follows. Historically, French Canadians have likened the modern-day Canada stemming from the Confederation of 1867 to a pact between two peoples that their representatives—chief of whom was Georges-Étienne Cartier—had concluded with English Canada in their name and that could not be amended without their consent. A keystone of this agreement was a federal system of government, instead of the unitary type of system preferred by many English Canadians, including the man who was to become the first Prime Minister of Canada, John A. Macdonald. Although this dualistic conception of the country was never completely accepted in the rest of Canada, it nevertheless was adhered to by the great majority of French Canadians until 1982.

In the aftermath of the rejection by Quebecers of the proposal for sovereignty-association put forward during the 1980 referendum, this conception was discarded without the consent of the government of Quebec, the only such authority to be controlled by a majority of francophones. It is impossible to overestimate Trudeau's role and responsibility in that process. In 1982, Trudeau imposed on the Canadian constitution a number of far-reaching amendments that marginalized Canada's predominantly French-speaking province: multiculturalism, Aboriginal rights, linguistic minority rights, equality among provinces, Canadian Charter of Rights.

Worse, seventeen years later, Trudeau came back from retirement to effectively torpedo the Meech Lake Accord, a political compromise accepted by every Canadian government to make Quebec part of the new 1982 constitution. The Meech Lake accord had been worked out among all of the country's premiers and provided for approval of the new constitution by Quebec in return for recognition of a minimum of political and institutional duality: Quebec was to be recognised as a distinct society within Canada. It was a historic compromise on the part of Quebec society, which had always considered itself to be a na-

tion. Rejection of the Meech Lake agreement triggered the Canada-Quebec crisis that you have heard about in Britain.

The Meech Lake agreement had been reached under ideal conditions. At the time, the government in power in Quebec was federalist and the Canadian federal government was open to the specificity of Quebec. It was also a period of prosperity which fostered generosity and openness. With the failure of this agreement, it became patently clear that the Canadian system had become significantly biased against the French-speaking majority of Quebecers and their specific concerns, that were henceforth relegated to a marginal status as never before in the history of Canada. These, then, are the factors that explain why 49.5% of Quebecers, including a clear majority of francophones, voted “yes” in the 1995 referendum on a proposition to make Quebec a sovereign state following the offer of an economic and political partnership with Canada. These election results reflect, in a large part, a reaction to the fact that Canada has systematically denied that the collective difference of Quebecers has political repercussions.

One last key to understanding the Canada-Quebec problem has to do with demography. The percentage of francophones in Canada has been declining since the middle of the twentieth century, and now stands at less than one fourth of the total population. On the other hand, with 83% of its seven million citizens being French-speaking, Quebec is now home to 90% of the country's francophones. The official Canadian discourse in Britain often makes little mention of Quebec but refers instead to a French Canada extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific and encompassing the country's ten provinces and three territories. In reality, however, the French-speaking society of Canada has become increasingly concentrated in Quebec and the bordering areas inhabited by the Franco-Ontarians and the Acadians. The problem with the Canadian political system is that it fails to consider the fact that Quebec constitutes the only non-anglophone society on a massively English-speaking continent (where francophones are outnumbered 40 to 1) that tends to consider Quebec society as an ethnic phenomenon.

### **A new English Canadian nationalism**

Clearly, the inability of the Canadian political system to recognise that Quebec's collective difference has political consequences, that this is a distinct society within Canada, is bad for Quebec. For example, in a Canadian constitutional system based on equal individual linguistic rights from coast to coast, without any reference to the French-speaking majority of Quebec,

it will become more and more difficult to defend in the courts the fact that French is—and must be—the predominant language in Quebec, without excluding English. This is because, from a simple individual point of view, the predominance of French in Quebec is discriminatory: indeed, it implies that a francophone is superior to an anglophone. There is a potential danger here as the predominance of French in Quebec is for a large majority of Quebecers a question of equity and common sense. It is something basic and essential for the Quebec identity to stay open and not feel unduly threatened<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, it is a Quebec problem. But it is, and will increasingly become a Canadian problem too because everything indicates that Quebec will stay in Canada. So this inability of the Canadian political system to recognise that Quebec collective difference has political consequences, affects in a negative way this whole system. Whether they are recognised or not, these consequences are there. But, because they are not well integrated, they make the Canadian system dysfunctional; reality takes its revenge<sup>5</sup>. First, a dangerous idealism is affecting every new tenet of Canadian identity since 1982: bilingualism, multiculturalism, equality of the provinces, aboriginal rights, charter of rights. Second, it weakens the federal principle itself, particularly the separation of constitutional powers between the federal government and the provinces that this principle implies. Third, the Quebec problem, via the presence of the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois at Ottawa, makes the federal government a one party property, namely that of the Liberal party of Canada.

That process has also contributed to worsen the regional alienation in the West. One has to be reminded that regional alienation, especially in the West, appeared to be *the other* Canadian structural problem (with the Quebec-Canada question) to the Pepin-Robarts Commission set up by the Trudeau government before the 1980 Quebec referendum : the report of the Pepin-Robarts Commission never was put into effect. It is no coincidence that these two structural problems have been made worse in many ways, as the Canadian political system focused, with the new 1982 constitution, on non-structural themes like multiculturalism, aboriginal rights and chartism.

These consequences of Trudeau's failure to integrate Quebec in a healthy way within Canada, are clearer now that people realise that the biggest probability is not Quebec leaving Canada but staying in Canada, its French-speaking majority more alienated than never. But the worst part of the Trudeau legacy is a stunning paradox, considering the ex-Prime Minister's well-known supposed aversion for nationalism of any kind. This odd legacy is a new Canadian nationalism—for which Trudeau is a hero—, an ideology doomed in the longer

run because it is based on the denial of the *Québécois* heart of the country<sup>6</sup>. A big problem with this ideology, that can be surprisingly intolerant toward modern Quebec's political difference, is that it is not aware of itself: it doesn't see itself as a nationalism at all<sup>7</sup>. It is therefore very difficult for these new Canadian nationalists to be critical of themselves.

Those with a real interest for Quebec are already aware of many of these facts. Unfortunately, that is not the case with some Canadianists in Britain. And yet, to do solid research on Canada, it is important to at least be aware of the existence of another vision of the country; otherwise, there is simply no understanding the Canada-Quebec problem. Obviously, that does not mean that this other vision can be defended on every point. Quebec indépendantistes, for example, have underestimated the threatening aspect of a political project which would separate an already highly Americanized and henceforth exclusively anglophone Canada into two; in this scenario, absorption by the U.S.A. would ultimately become likely. The two referendums they have lost, along with the resulting weakening of Quebec's position, have highlighted a certain lack of realism among Quebec nationalists concerning the nature of Quebec identity and its relation with Canada. It is the other part of a political dead-end that Trudeau's actions clearly contributed to make worse.

### Author's Note

Trained as a lawyer, the author is teacher and a researcher at École nationale d'administration publique (National School of Public Administration) in Montréal. In 1989, he wrote *Le défi québécois*, published in English in 1990 under the title *A Canadian Challenge* (Oolichan Books, Lantzville, BC) and republished in French in 2000 at Les Presses de l'Université Laval. In 2002, Mr. Dufour published "Restoring the Federal Principle: The Place of Quebec in the Canadian Social Union" for the *Institute for Research on Public Policy* in Montréal (Policy Matters, vol.3, no1, January 2002).

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See A. Silver, *The French Canadian Idea of Confederation*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982
- <sup>2</sup> See C. Dufour, "The Unthinkable and the Quebec Heart", pp. 42–53 in D. Taras (ed.) *A Passion for Identity : Introduction to Canadian Studies*. 2nd ed. Toronto, Nelson Canada, 1993.

- <sup>3</sup> See G. Laforest, *Trudeau and the End of a Canadian Dream*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> See C. Dufour, *Lettre aux souverainistes québécois et aux fédéralistes canadiens qui sont restés fidèles au Québec*, Stanké, Montréal, 2000 (pp 49–61). See also J-F Lisée, "Invest in Quebec's uniqueness", *Inroads*, 10 (2001), pp 167 ss.
- <sup>5</sup> On these negative consequences on the Canadian political system, see C. Dufour, *A Canadian Challenge—Le défi québécois*, IRPP/Oolichan, Lantzville, 1990 (pp145 ss).
- <sup>6</sup> On the inability of this new English-Canadian nationalism to integrate Quebec, see K. McRoberts, *Misconceiving Canada: The Struggle for National Unity*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> On this difficulty of English-Canadian nationalism to see itself as a nationalism, see W. Kymlicka, "Multinational Federalism in Canada: Rethinking the Partnership" in *Beyond the Impasse*, ed. Guy Laforest and Roger Gibbins, Institute for Research on Public Policy, Montreal, 1998, pp. 15–50.

## General Bibliography

- Dufour, Christian, *Restoring the Federal Principle: The Place of Quebec in the Canadian Social Union*, Institute for Research on Public Policy, Montreal, Policy Matters, vol.3, no 1, January 2002.
- Dufour, Christian, *Lettre aux souverainistes québécois et aux fédéralistes canadiens qui sont restés fidèles au Québec*, Stanké, Montréal, 2000. (English summary of the conclusion of the book : "Appeal to Sovereignists and to Federalists Loyal to Quebec", in *Inroads*, 10 (2001), pp. 187–192.
- Dufour, Christian, *A Canadian Challenge—Le défi québécois*, IRPP/Oolichan, Lantzville, 1990 (original French edition republished in 2000 at Les Presses de l'Université Laval).
- Dufour, Christian, *La Rupture tranquille* (in French), Boréal, Montréal, 1992.
- Dufour, Christian, "The Unthinkable and the Quebec Heart", in Taras, David (ed.). *A Passion for Identity : Introduction to Canadian Studies*. 2nd ed., Toronto, Nelson Canada, 1993, pp. 42–53
- Dufour, Christian. "A Little History", in Dodge, William (éd.). *Boundaries of Identity : A Quebec Reader*. Toronto, Lester, 1992, pp. 27–33.
- Laforest, Guy, *Trudeau and the End of a Canadian Dream*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1995.
- Silver, A. I., *The French Canadian Idea of Confederation*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982.

Pepin-Robarts Commission Report, Government of Canada, Ottawa, 1979.

McRoberts, Kenneth, *Misconceiving Canada: The Struggle for National Unity*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997, second printing, 1998.

Kymlicka, Will, "Multinational Federalism in Canada: Rethinking the Partnership", in *Beyond the Impasse*, ed. Guy Laforest and Roger Gibbins, Institute for Research on Public Policy, Montreal, 1998, pp. 15–50.

