

Sovereignty at an Impasse

The Highs and Lows of Quebec Nationalism

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Summary

- Although dissatisfied with its constitutional status, the Quebec nation has said “no” to sovereignty.
- Several factors explain this, including the significant economic, social and cultural progress realized since the 1960s — in part a result of policies championed by the sovereignty movement.
- Above all, many Quebecers are ambivalent about their situation within Canada because, when the pros and cons are weighed, the scale never tips clearly to one side.

Sommaire

- Même s’il est insatisfait sur le plan constitutionnel, le Québec a dit non à la souveraineté.
- Plusieurs facteurs expliquent ce rejet, notamment l’ampleur des progrès économiques, sociaux et culturels accomplis depuis les années 1960, en partie grâce aux politiques défendues par les souverainistes.
- Fondamentalement, de nombreux Québécois restent ambivalents à l’égard de leur situation à l’intérieur du Canada, car la balance des avantages et des désavantages ne penche jamais clairement d’un même côté.

OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS, Quebec has repeatedly presented the rest of the country with an ultimatum: “Give us more, or we’re leaving!” After two Quebec referendums (in 1980 and 1995) and a national referendum (1992), after countless constitutional conferences, reports and debates that dominated Canada’s political landscape for more than a generation, a vexing contradiction has emerged: Quebec remains dissatisfied, and yet it hasn’t left!

Clearly, Quebec has not achieved its goals. None of the 10 Quebec premiers since the patriation of the Canadian Constitution from London in 1982 has been willing to sign it. All attempts at constitutional reform — Meech Lake (1987-1990), Charlottetown (1992), Calgary (1997) — have ended in failure.

Since then, neither the federal government nor the other provincial governments have wanted to reopen the Constitution. In June 2017, when the Premier of Quebec suggested a constitutional dialogue aimed at recognizing Quebec's demands, he found little openness in either Ottawa or the other provinces.

At the same time, all indications are that Quebec is not about to leave. In 2015, the Bloc Québécois received the support of one-fifth of the electorate, compared with one-half in 2004. In 2014, the Parti Québécois (PQ) saw its share of the vote plunge to half of what it had been in 1981. In 2016, its new leader, Jean-François Lisée, pledged not to hold a referendum if the PQ formed the next government. More worrying still for supporters of the sovereignty project, only one out of five Quebecers expects Quebec to become an independent country some day.¹

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A new query can now be added to the age-old question “What does Quebec want?” Given its dissatisfaction with the constitutional set-up, why has Quebec said “no” to sovereignty, which was supposed to be its “national destiny”? This question is particularly troubling when we consider the many nations around the world that have moved swiftly to independence, with wide popular support, over the past 50 years.²

Various responses to this enigma have been suggested. Former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau compared Quebec nationalism to a blackmailer who always asks for more and is never satisfied, who finally tires of his own demands and turns elsewhere. He added that the nationalists “are not just perennial losers, they’re poor losers.”³

Others have pointed to the mentality of a colonized people only half-prepared to assert itself, locked in fear⁴ — a legacy of the British occupation of 1760. For example, the singer Biz from the band Loco Locass writes, “In our collective subconscious, the Conquest is the equivalent of a rape.”⁵ Others have argued that Quebecers’ country was “stolen” from them through cheating and propaganda.⁶

I have a fundamentally different theory: the ambivalence does not reside primarily in the realm of the emotions but springs from “equivocal thinking,” according to the typology developed by sociologist and historian Gérard Bouchard.⁷ Equivocal thinking is characterized by difficulty negotiating and reconciling contradictions; it leaves options and representations as scattered fragments in the collective consciousness. As a result of equivocal thinking, when they see that the weight of advantages over disadvantages does not lean clearly to one side, Quebecers are unable to make a choice. This, I would suggest, has been the dominant characteristic of political thought in Quebec on the thorny issue of sovereignty.

At other times, though less frequently, Quebec has adopted a different attitude, which Bouchard labels “organic thinking.”⁸ Organic thinking has sometimes enabled Quebec to achieve a hard-fought and imperfect reconciliation of the contradictions, in part, at least, through “a mediation, a conjunction that creates an apparently consistent whole”⁹ and sparks “collective dynamism.”¹⁰ However, this organic thinking has been limited in scope — strong enough to spur change, but not sufficient to lead to the ultimate goal of sovereignty that many desired.

The ups and downs of nationalism and sovereignty have therefore not been caused by fear or deceit, but rather are the result of a series of historical paradoxes that have generated more equivocal thinking than organic thinking.

To test this hypothesis, I will survey the history of Quebec, which I have divided into three periods: 1760 to 1960, when sovereignty was not on the radar; 1960 to 1995, when sovereignty was an ever-present theme; and 1995 to 2017, when the sovereignist project declined and there was a certain disenchantment with the issue.

1760-1960 – Two Centuries of Paradoxes

The 200 years that followed the British Conquest of 1759-60 are often analyzed through the lens of a dominator-dominated relationship. According to this view, the “new colonized subjects,” then called “Canadiens,” were victims, suffering defeat after defeat, unable to act or even to contemplate their future as a nation. Historian Denis Vaugeois describes the state of mind that prevailed during this protracted period as one of profound alienation,¹¹ and historian Gilles Laporte speaks of a people paralyzed by the Conquest.¹²

My hypothesis is that the inability to chart a course toward change did not derive from the harshness of the domination or the fear it instilled, but rather from the paradoxes that punctuate history.

Let us begin with the paradoxes of the Conquest. At first glance, the military defeat, the occupation by British troops and the intransigence of the *Royal Proclamation of 1763* appear clear enough. However, the new colonial elites were, in practice, ill-equipped to exert complete control: the British government was too concerned with pro-independence sentiment in the American colonies to calm the situation north of the border. The upshot was the *Quebec Act* of 1774, which reflected a decidedly pragmatic political strategy. It recognized French civil law and the role of the Catholic Church, and permitted members

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of the majority to hold public office. Simply put, 1774 softened the effects of 1760. The “victim” may have been hard done by, judged by today’s standards, but given the possibilities available at the time, we can say it fared quite well. This foundational paradox runs through the historiography. The Montreal School of historians (Michel Brunet,¹³ Guy Frégault, Maurice Séguin), which took its cue from Lionel Groulx, argued that the Conquest “decapitated” a thriving society. Frégault writes that the Canadiens “were no more than human remnants, bereft of leadership and means, without which they were incapable of designing and implementing the policies and the economy they needed.”¹⁴

On the other hand, for the Laval School (Marcel Trudel, Jean Hamelin, Fernand Ouellet), “the Conquest of 1760 also yielded certain benefits.”¹⁵ For example, whereas commerce had been restricted under the French regime, it was now open to all. Lending at interest was eased. Military service, which had been compulsory, became voluntary, and was remunerated. In the courts, defendants were presumed innocent until proven guilty. Bans on newspaper publishing were lifted.

The historical differences between France and Britain explain many things. England already had a solid parliamentary system and economic liberalism flourished there, while France was still an absolutist monarchy bound by the fetters of the old feudal order. It would undergo a cycle of revolutions and counter-revolutions before it stabilized in the late nineteenth century. For a colony, British domination was therefore more “promising” than that of the French.

When we consider the two decades following the Conquest, it is difficult to say clearly and definitively where the “nation” stood. Was it a loser or a winner in defeat? To see only disadvantages is to ignore the benefits ushered in by the new colonial administration. Conversely, arguing that the advantages clearly outweighed the disadvantages discounts the fact that a dominant minority with a different language and religion was installed on top of the social pyramid.

Coming back to the historical narrative and turning to the paradoxes of democratic development, the *Constitutional Act* of 1791 created two colonies, Upper Canada and Lower Canada, which correspond to present-day Ontario and Quebec. Each had a legislative assembly. The elected representatives did not control the government in either colony, but the foundations of democracy had been laid. Quebec’s National Assembly came into being long before it bore that name, and it did so under the British Crown!

Surprisingly, at first democratic aspirations were embraced, for the most part, by anglophones (at the time called “les Anglais”), even though democracy would

benefit francophones (at the time called “les Canadiens”). In fact, between 1764 and 1784, anglophone leaders sent a series of requests for a legislative assembly to the governor and to London.¹⁶ Meanwhile, francophones declared themselves “fairly satisfied with the government they had.”¹⁷

The popular narrative depicts the rebellion by the Patriotes in 1837-38 as a binary opposition between francophones and anglophones, with the former defending Parliament and the latter seeking to maintain the privileges of an authoritarian government. However, nothing is quite so simple. First, the fight over democracy was also waged between anglophones. Second, in both colonies, democratic demands were rejected at the time, and rebels were hanged: 12 in Lower Canada and 17 in Upper Canada. Lastly, in Lower Canada, the battle for democracy “was fought by anglophones as much as francophones.”¹⁸

In his *Report on the Affairs of British North America* (1839), Lord Durham recommended that the francophones be assimilated and that the two colonies be merged. He recommended that they have equal representation in the legislature, even though Lower Canada had a far larger population than Upper Canada. The *Act of Union* of 1840 therefore outraged the francophone majority — all the more so because they were saddled with Upper Canada’s debts. However, barely two years later, the new Legislative Assembly was operating on a double majority system. More significantly, a dual system, with co-prime ministers, one anglophone and one francophone, was adopted. Trudel writes: “While it is true that the two provinces had been merged in theory, from an administrative point of view they remained as distinct as they had previously been.”¹⁹ The constitutional scholar Eugénie Brouillet describes the situation thus:

*Paradoxically, it was under a legislative union that cultural dualism was truly institutionalized through various constitutional conventions... Thus a constitutional convention developed within the Parliament of the United Province of Canada whereby issues related to the cultural identity of the communities in question (education, municipal affairs and so forth) could be handled differently in each of the two sections.*²⁰

In another reversal, the government became “responsible” to the Parliament of United Canada in 1848, thanks to the combined efforts of Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine and Robert Baldwin. That was precisely what the reformers in Upper Canada and Lower Canada who had been defeated and repressed 10 years earlier demanded.

We can draw the following conclusions from this fight for parliamentary democracy: the nationalists are right to underscore the assimilationist intentions of

1840, but the benefits of 1848 must be entered on the other side of the ledger. As for the events of 1837-38, they are emblematic for anglophone and francophone democrats alike. Therefore, the English-French divide was only one factor during this period, which was defined primarily by the conflict between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, between tradition and modernity.²¹

The establishment of Canadian federalism was also marked by paradox. At the beginning of the drawn-out negotiations that led to the *British North America (BNA) Act*, John A. Macdonald's intention was to create a unitary state with a single government. However, in 1865, he acknowledged that a federal structure would be necessary, because of Quebec.

*However, on looking at the subject in the Conference, and discussing the matter as we did, most unreservedly, and with desire to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, we found that such a system was impracticable. In the first place it would not meet the assent of the people of Lower Canada, because they felt that in their peculiar position — being in a minority, with a different language, nationality and religion from the majority — in case of a junction with the other provinces, their institutions and their laws might be assailed, and their ancestral associations, on which they prided themselves, attacked and prejudiced...So, that those who were, like myself, in favour of a Legislative Union, were obliged to modify their views and accept the project of a Federal Union as the only scheme practicable, even for the Maritime Provinces.*²²

With the *BNA Act* of 1867, Quebec's francophone majority recovered a space of its own, this time with real powers, within the Canadian federal framework.²³ However, when we look at the preamble to section 91, particularly the power to make laws for "peace, order and good government" granted to Ottawa, it is obvious that the spirit of federalism was not fully respected. The same can be said of other provisions, such as the power of disallowance and the declaratory power.

Despite these evident infringements of federalist principles, it is important to bear in mind that francophones were not excluded from the drafting of the *BNA Act*. The division of powers between the central and provincial governments (sections 91 and 92) was based largely on the ideas formulated in 1858 by the francophone physician and politician Joseph-Charles Taché.²⁴ The outcome of the negotiations conducted by John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier then won the support of a narrow majority of francophone members of the Legislative Assembly.²⁵ The *BNA Act* also received the support of the Catholic Church, then a central institution in French Canadian society.

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But there is more. If the *BNA Act* had no benefits for francophones, why did the Quebec electorate almost always give Macdonald's Conservatives a plurality of seats between 1867 and 1882, and then massively support the Liberal governments of Wilfrid Laurier, William Lyon Mackenzie King and Louis Saint-Laurent?

Linguistic tensions did exist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the greatest controversies involved francophones in other Canadian provinces: the Riel affair in Manitoba in 1885, and Regulation 17, governing the use of French in Ontario schools in 1912. Both related to matters under provincial jurisdiction. Historians Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher and Jean-Claude Robert write that these conflicts, "while serious, did not so much call federalism into question as they did the Conservative Party."²⁶ Political scientist Louis Balthazar concludes that "on the whole, French Canadian nationalism between 1840 and 1960 was not a significant threat to the country's anglophone majority."²⁷ Gérard Bouchard sees in the discussions about Quebec's political status throughout this period only equivocal and fragmented thinking, with one or two exceptions.²⁸ In my view, the image of a nation racked by paradoxes prevails over that of a nation "paralyzed" by fear.

In the economic and social realms, however, the picture looks different. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, set up by the federal government in 1963, came to the following conclusion:

*Our examination of the social and economic aspects of Canadian life (based on 1961 census figures) shows that there is inequality in the partnership between Canadians of French origin and those of British origin. By every statistical measurement which we used, Canadians of French origin are considerably lower on the socio-economic scale. They are not as well represented in the decision-making positions and in the ownership of industrial enterprises, and they do not have the same access to the fruits of modern technology.*²⁹

The disparities between francophones and anglophones cut across all fields: health, education, housing. They were particularly evident in the labour market: often, the labourers were francophone and the bosses anglophone. Major strikes such as Asbestos (1949), Louiseville (1952) and Murdochville (1957), to name a few, reflected systemic inequality. The 1955 riot at the Montreal Forum, sparked by National Hockey League President Clarence Campbell's decision to suspend star player Maurice Richard, was a symbolic but powerful manifestation of the divide. On the following day, André Laurendeau, then an editorialist with the newspaper *Le Devoir*, wrote: "The crowd that expressed its anger on Thursday night wasn't moved only by its love of sport or feeling that an injustice had been done to its hero. A frustrated people was protesting against its fate."³⁰

Who was responsible for the indisputable economic inferiority of Quebec francophones? There were two contending points of view among sociologists and historians at the beginning of the 1960s.

At first glance, this looks like a binary opposition. There seems to be no ambiguity or paradox, nothing that might breed ambivalence. All conditions appear ripe for a push by francophones to win liberation from anglophone domination. But who was responsible for the indisputable economic inferiority of Quebec francophones? In intellectual circles, there were two contending points of view among sociologists and historians at the beginning of the 1960s.

Quebec nationalists attributed the economic inferiority of francophones to anglophone domination. According to Maurice Séguin, the Canadiens were “excluded from big business, in practical terms,”³¹ “excluded from primary extraction of the main natural resources,” and therefore had become “proletarian servants of the Conqueror.”

The Conquerors’ stranglehold on Quebec’s economy flowed logically from this series of exclusions...the Canadiens had become akin to the blacks in resource-supplying African colonies and were relegated by force to the margins of their own country’s economic life...Most large companies were owned and managed by the British, while the Canadiens provided the labour.

According to this school of thought, francophones found themselves blocked mainly by exogenous factors thrown up by “the Other”: federalism, English Canadians and, at the outset, the Conquest of 1760. For Séguin and others, Quebec independence was therefore the logical solution.³²

For those who rejected the nationalist reading, the causes were clearly endogenous and the solution was of course quite different. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the journalist Jean-Charles Harvey and many of the progressive artists associated with the *Refus global* manifesto of 1948 believed that the inferiority of francophones was due to the choices made by francophone elites. Their economic conservatism was crystallized in the Catholic Church, which held sway over their thinking. Trudeau wrote: “Our social thinking was so idealistic, so *a priori*, so far removed from reality and to be blunt, so ineffectual, that it practically never became a real part of the community’s living and evolving institutions.”³³ They also pointed to the agrarianism and traditionalism that had dominated French Canadian literature for almost a century.³⁴ The mindset and culture of the day bred contempt for business, industry and modernity, they charged. According to this interpretation, it was the French Canadians who shut themselves out of economic development. This thesis finds support in the work of many sociologists, such as Maurice Tremblay³⁵ and Norman W. Taylor.³⁶

There is some compelling evidence for the second interpretation: Quebec was the last Canadian province to grant women the right to vote, and it

nationalized hydroelectricity well after Ontario, New Brunswick and Manitoba did. When Maurice Duplessis, who had been in power since 1944, died in 1959, Quebec was suffering from underinvestment in education and health³⁷ as a result of its own choices, inflicting on the francophone majority a historical lag in comparison with postwar governance across the west. Note also that Duplessis never enjoyed the electoral support of Anglo-Quebecers. The English in the west of Montreal, in particular, systematically voted Liberal.

This is not to say that English Canada was blameless. In fact, in “La nouvelle trahison des clercs” — a long text attacking the “separatists” published in the early 1960s — Trudeau lambasted English Canadians for seeking to “completely assimilate” French Canadians. He wrote, “English-speaking Canadians have never given up their condescending attitude to their French-speaking fellows, even to this day.”³⁸ In the economic realm, English Canadians had come to regard French Canadians as “un cochon de payant” (a sucker who pays full price), to be endlessly exploited. “Finally, in social and cultural matters,” Trudeau continued, “Anglo-Canadian nationalism has expressed itself quite simply by disdain. Generation after generation of Anglo-Saxons have lived in Quebec without getting around to learning three sentences of French.” Francophone nationalism, therefore, was a reaction to the “aggressive nationalism” of the anglophones.

Hence, at the beginning of the 1960s, intellectuals were still divided. The vast majority of Quebecers remained profoundly ambivalent. To put it simply, the two aspects of the problem can be described as follows.

On the one hand, French Quebec and English Canada lived in mutual ignorance, in two solitudes. But from 1760 to 1960 their relationship was not so tense as to make the words “independence,” “sovereignty” or “separation” a significant part of the political vocabulary. This was likely due to the following factors: (1) despite everything, the Conquest did bring benefits; (2) anglophones did play a part in establishing democracy; (3) the Canadian federal state was produced by a joint process, in which francophones played an important role; and (4) the conservative mindset specific to Quebec society exerted sufficient force to check the emergence of alternative visions.

On the other hand, those words did burst into political discourse in the early 1960s, probably because of the following factors: (1) English Canadians harboured feelings of “disdain” for French Canadians; (2) the economic status of French Canadians remained inferior to that of anglophones; (3) the inequality cut across all aspects of daily life; (4) based on what was known at the time, it was legitimate to lay the inequality at the feet of Canadian federalism and

francophones' minority position within Canada, although the contrary interpretation was also legitimate.

1960-95 – The Rise of the Sovereignty Movement

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EVEN TODAY, it is difficult to make sense of the radical shift that occurred during the 1960s. No doubt, fundamental change was inevitable. In *Le Québec en mutation*, sociologist Guy Rocher writes: “Quebec experienced a strange contradiction in the first half of the twentieth century: it adopted the structures of industrial civilization but retained the mentality, spirit and values of a preindustrial society.”³⁹ It might be said that, in the 1960s, ways of thinking caught up with the modernity of industrial structures.

That process was hastened, perhaps even caused, by a series of far-reaching changes taking place in the Western world: baby boomers reaching adulthood, the emergence of the counterculture, the rise of a new feminism, access to new ideological content through television. Those winds of change resonated around the world — in the decolonization movements of Africa and Asia, the demonstrations against the Vietnam war in the US, and even the Vatican II reforms in the Catholic Church.

In this new environment, Quebec's traditional political thinking redefined itself. The transition from the old nationalism to the new entailed four key changes:

- (1) From ethnic “French Canadian” nationalism to civic “Québécois” nationalism;
- (2) From a political right to a clearly centre-left, indeed statist or even Keynesian social-democratic position;
- (3) From religious to secular;
- (4) From calling for greater autonomy to largely supporting independence, without, however, embracing violence.⁴⁰

Applying Gérard Bouchard's typology, we could say that during this period Quebec shifted quite quickly from equivocal thinking to organic thinking, the mode of thought that is capable of negotiating contradictions and finding solutions.

We will begin by considering the first three of the changes listed above, which were supported by a much wider consensus than was the fourth. When socio-economic problems, as well as health and education, were defined in the context of Quebec's borders rather than those of French Canada, it became much easier to formulate political solutions, and for political parties to take

action and achieve electoral success. More important still, the Quebec government could operate more effectively when it no longer needed to deal with the federal government or other provincial legislatures. This geographic refocusing made a decisive difference. Because of its social-democratic character, the new nationalism was able to approach most of Quebec's socio-economic problems not as inevitable, but as issues that called for practical public policy solutions. And being no longer religious and conservative, the new nationalism was in sync with the protest movements of the age, which were particularly influential among young people. All these factors played into each other and helped produce the "collective dynamic" that Bouchard associates with organic thinking.

In the first half of the 1960s, the Liberal Party of Quebec was the home of this new nationalism, at least as far as the first three changes I have noted above were concerned. The victory of its "équipe du tonnerre" in June 1960, under the slogan "C'est l'temps que ça change" (time for a change), ushered in a period that later came to be known as "the Quiet Revolution." In his 1962 budget speech, Premier Jean Lesage was forthright:

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We can easily see, however, that our material power is far from proportionately corresponding to that of our English compatriots or of our American friends. There are obviously valid reasons to explain this state of affairs but that does not make it any less disturbing...Should we in these circumstances resign ourselves and take for granted that nothing can be done to remedy such a long-standing situation? I believe that if this were our attitude then we would be lacking in realism. We possess in effect an instrument, a common lever, through which we can expect astonishing results: evidently we cannot hope for miracles but in our situation we would be guilty if we did not use it. This common lever is our provincial government, the state of Quebec; we must not overlook that, from all points of view it is the most powerful institution at our disposal.⁴¹

The widely supported move toward a highly interventionist state soon began and continued into the early 1980s: public spending surged, state-owned corporations and government interventions proliferated. As for identity, the term "French Canadian" was replaced by "Québécois" and "province of Quebec" by "the Quebec state." The once-ubiquitous Church lost control of the health care and education systems, and its ranks — the priests and nuns — were halved in the space of less than 20 years. Church attendance collapsed during this period.⁴² As might be expected, the end of the clergy's hegemony created room for new ideas. Poets and intellectuals gave voice to a changing Quebec; a modern "we" permeated literature and song. Of the many indicators of modernization, the most telling may have

been the plunging birth rate, which dropped by 50 percent in less than 10 years.⁴³ So much for the points on which there was wide consensus.

Of the four factors that defined the transition from the old nationalism to the new, there remains one that split Quebec society: the issue of independence. Was it a possible, conceivable, desirable or necessary goal? We can delineate four very different positions on this.

The first was that of the Quebec Liberal Party. Its nationalism was most clear-cut in the 1962 election when it campaigned under the slogan “Maîtres chez nous” (masters in our own house). Also in a nationalist spirit, the Liberals adopted the Gérin-Lajoie doctrine in 1965, which established Quebec’s international position. In 1974, they introduced Bill 22, the *Official Languages Act*, which made French the official language and regulated access to schools for children of immigrants. In 1980, then-Liberal Party leader Claude Ryan took a nationalist approach with his Beige paper, in which he advocated a more decentralized Canada. After the failure of Meech Lake, it was Robert Bourassa who asserted the right to self-determination, stating: “English Canada must clearly understand that, regardless of what is said or done, Quebec is today and always will be a society that is distinct, free and able to assume its destiny and development.”⁴⁴ More recently, Jean Charest⁴⁵ and Philippe Couillard⁴⁶ have claimed that Quebec has the means and resources to become a sovereign country. In short, the Liberals embraced a genuine but moderate nationalism that always respected the federal framework. Their view was that sovereignty was possible but not desirable and certainly not necessary.

The second position was that of the Union Nationale, which was still a force in the 1960s. In 1965, its leader, Daniel Johnson, surprised everyone by releasing a book titled *Égalité ou indépendance* (equality or independence), in which he stated: “I believe we should not reject the separatist solution out of hand.”⁴⁷ This is not to say that Johnson supported independence. To him, independence was more a weapon to be brandished as a threat than a real first choice. Sovereignty was not a wish but a feasible option, an “insurance policy.”

The third position was that of the Parti Québécois (PQ), founded in 1968 by René Lévesque. Was it a pro-independence party? At first glance it was, but in fact it advocated a new arrangement between Quebec and Canada, an agreement between equals referred to as “sovereignty-association.” In both the 1980 and 1995 referendums, the PQ argued for an association or partnership with Canada, a tacit recognition that most Quebecers could not conceive of Quebec’s future without a solid link to Canada and the advantages it conferred.

In both the 1980 and 1995 referendums, the PQ argued for an association or partnership with Canada.

The fourth and last position had much narrower appeal. It was held by Pierre Bourgault's Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (RIN) and some subgroups within the PQ, whose spiritual leaders were Jacques Parizeau and Camille Laurin. Until the 2000s, it also enjoyed support in artistic and intellectual circles among the likes of Pierre Vallières (*White Niggers of America*, 1968), Michèle Lalonde (*Speak White*, 1968), Gaston Miron (*L'homme rapaillé*, 1970), and Pierre Falardeau, a caustic and sarcastic critic of Quebecers' ambivalence (*Elvis Gratton*, 1985).

In short, there was no consensus on this point but rather a spectrum of positions of different nationalist hues. With the exception of the fourth, all these approaches contained a measure of equivocation that rendered them ambiguous: the Liberals and the Union Nationale said "Canada, but ..." while the PQ said "Quebec, but ..."

Quebec's electoral politics quickly resolved into a two-way battle between the Liberals and the PQ.⁴⁸ In 1970, in the first election it contested, the PQ won 23 percent of the vote. In 1973, it took 30 percent, and in 1976 it was elected with 41 percent on a promise to hold a referendum on Quebec's future.

In the late 1970s, the PQ was a powerful mass party with more than 250,000 members.⁴⁹ Respected academics joined its ranks, followed by well-known media personalities. It drew strength from its ability to hitch sovereignty to the Quiet Revolution and all it implied in terms of modernity, thirst for freedom and state intervention.

Despite the PQ's rise, sovereignty garnered only 40 percent support in the 1980 referendum. This outcome cannot be explained without considering the impact of Pierre Elliott Trudeau on the political dynamic and, especially, what the man himself represented.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Trudeau made a name for himself with his public attacks on the Duplessis regime and his support for the Asbestos strike. In 1967, he became known as a forward-looking justice minister when he tabled a bill that decriminalized homosexuality and abortion, and also made divorce easier.

When he became prime minister of Canada in 1968, Trudeau lost no time making the federal civil service officially bilingual, an unpopular policy in English Canada. He opened the debate on the bill that led to the *Official Languages Act* by recalling "the existence of the two major language groups, both of which are strong enough in numbers and in material and intellectual resources to resist the forces of assimilation."⁵⁰ Picking up on the positions he had

defended in *Cité Libre*, he added: “In the past this underlying reality of our country has not been adequately reflected in many of our public institutions.” His goal was clear: “French Canada can survive not by turning in on itself but by reaching out to claim its full share of every aspect of Canadian life.”

In English Canada as in Quebec, Trudeau was seen as the embodiment of “French power.” From 1968 to 1980, the Liberal Party took a significantly larger proportion of the francophone vote than the anglophone vote across Canada. In 1980, it swept 74 of Quebec’s 75 seats, with 68 percent of the vote. This background makes it easier to understand why Quebecers remained divided. With divergent positions on such important issues that affected so many areas, represented by two iconic figures from Quebec, it was difficult to secure massive support for one side or the other. For political scientist Gérard Bergeron, the Trudeau-Lévesque opposition sums up Quebec’s ambivalence, expressing the “two-sided mirror” that typifies Quebec society.⁵¹

More fundamentally, three objective factors help explain why the sovereignty movement reached a plateau.

The first is the near-unanimous opposition of non-francophones. For the nationalism that emerged after 1960, the main battle was defending French against Anglicization in shops, signs and business. It demanded that legislation be used to check the advance of English.⁵² The opposition of anglophones was therefore understandable. Their hostility to sovereignty was, of course, more deep-rooted still. On the attitude of anglophones, sociologists Gilles Gagné and Simon Langlois write: “They are the majority in Canada and they would become a minority in a new sovereign country, a change many of them perceive, rightly or wrongly, as a threat to their historical rights.”⁵³ Clearly, reconciling the anglophone community to sovereignty would be impossible, and it remains so. Based on 1980 data, the date of the first referendum, and assuming that virtually all non-francophones, 20 percent of the population, were against sovereignty,⁵⁴ the sovereignist side would have needed the support of 60 percent of francophones to get above 50 percent.

The second obstacle was among francophones themselves. For the drive for sovereignty and national liberation to be coherent, the history of the 1867-1967 period had to be reinterpreted. The movement’s leaders had to suppose that pre-1960 francophone Quebec, which had supported federalist governments for 100 years, had been mired in “la grande noirceur,” the dark ages, if not in a state of alienation. For example, Maurice Séguin, considered the theoretician of independence,⁵⁵ argued that the constitutional arrangements of

1867 had lulled Quebecers to sleep: “Without realizing it, they accepted their economic and social subordination...not seeing how pernicious it was.”⁵⁶ That was basically the baby boomers’ complaint about the previous generation. Valid or not, this necessary rereading of the past came at a price: for 50 years, the francophone majority was split along generational lines,⁵⁷ and families were divided between two opposing visions.

My analysis of data from major Canadian electoral surveys sheds more light on this phenomenon.⁵⁸ From 1968 to 2015, the generation that came before the baby boom remained systematically and strongly opposed to the sovereignist enterprise (figure 1). The baby boomers did find allies among the next generation, Generation X, but over the years the youngest age group, Generation Y, has reservations, and is more concerned with environmental and economic issues. In a CROP survey of 500 people aged 18 to 24 conducted in 2014, two-thirds of respondents said federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for Quebec.⁵⁹

For 50 years, the francophone majority was split along generational lines, and families were divided between two opposing visions.

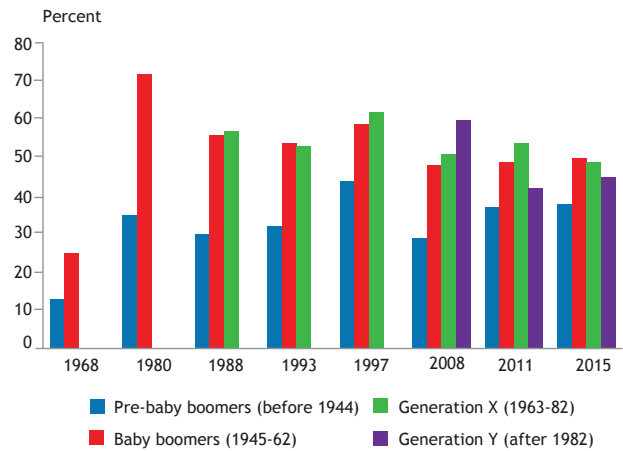
Would it have been possible to close this generation gap? In my view, it would have been difficult. To logically reconcile the Quebec electorate’s repeated support for federalist politicians in Ottawa and Quebec City between 1867 and 1967 with the narrative of domination, it would be necessary to assume that previous generations were blinded by alienation.

The third and final obstacle relates to social class. Its impact is more elusive. In the popular imagination, the francophone proletariat, at first forbearing and then defiant, is a recurring image. In song, we find it in Claude Gauthier’s “Le grand six pieds” (1960), Raymond Lévesque’s “Bozo-les-culottes” (1967) and Félix Leclerc’s “L’alouette en colère” (1972).

While this class opposition does reflect reality to some extent, it must be treated with caution. The data from the 1968 Canadian Election Study do show stronger support for sovereignty among the lower classes, but the statistical relationship is barely significant statistically (figure 2). Sociologist Maurice Pinard’s analysis, based on a 1963 study, found the highest levels of support among the middle classes, particularly professionals and service workers.⁶⁰ His later analyses concluded that intellectuals — teachers, artists, creators, writers — were the most likely to support the sovereignist cause.⁶¹ Sociologist Marcel Fournier suggested that the strongest backing for sovereignty came from “language workers,”⁶² often members of the middle class endowed with “cultural capital.” In the 1990s, however, when the movement peaked, the strongest support came from the wealthiest class, at least proportionately.⁶³

FIGURE 1
Support for sovereignty,
by generation, 1968-
2015

Source: Canadian Election Studies.



Could the sovereignist leaders have done more to reconcile class interests in their words and deeds? Before taking power, René Lévesque liked to say he had a “prejudice in favour of workers.” After it was elected, the PQ tried to win broad support for its project and governance. Among other things, it organized a series of summits bringing together the main players in the economy (1977, 1982, 1996, 2000). However, when the economic crisis hit Quebec in 1982, the PQ was unable to maintain this stance, and many union activists broke with the party.

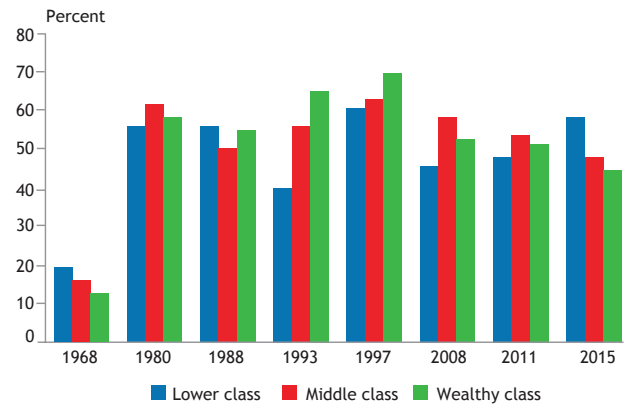
There is an exception to the levelling off of support for sovereignty: the 1988-92 period. The controversy surrounding the Meech Lake Accord spearheaded by Prime Minister Mulroney, followed by its failure in June 1990, sparked an unprecedented surge in support, hitting 61 percent in September 1990.⁶⁴ Pierre Bourgault, the former leader of the RIN, called for “a referendum now, it’s urgent!”⁶⁵ The following year, Claude Gauthier, vice president of the CROP polling firm, commented:

*But would the Yes side win if there was a referendum tomorrow morning? It’s not certain... There is a hard core of about 40 percent of independen-
tists in Quebec. Among the others, there’s a bit of everything: people who
are disappointed, strategists who want to make English Canada shift its
position, others who say, “if they push us too far...”⁶⁶*

Subsequent analyses confirmed the hesitation: the more clearly the question was phrased (separation, independence), the lower the support. Conversely, the more the question involved a new association, agreement or partnership with Canada, the more support increased.⁶⁷ So even when support for sovereignty was at its peak, there was an element of ambivalence. Figure 3 summarizes the evolution of support for sovereignty and highlights key political events, by year.

FIGURE 2
Support for sovereignty,
by social class, 1968-
2015

Source: Canadian Election Studies.



1995-2017 – The Decline of Support for Sovereignty

IN THE LAST PERIOD, the sovereignty movement contracted, slightly at first and then more dramatically in the past 10 years. To understand why, we shall pick up the historical narrative one last time.

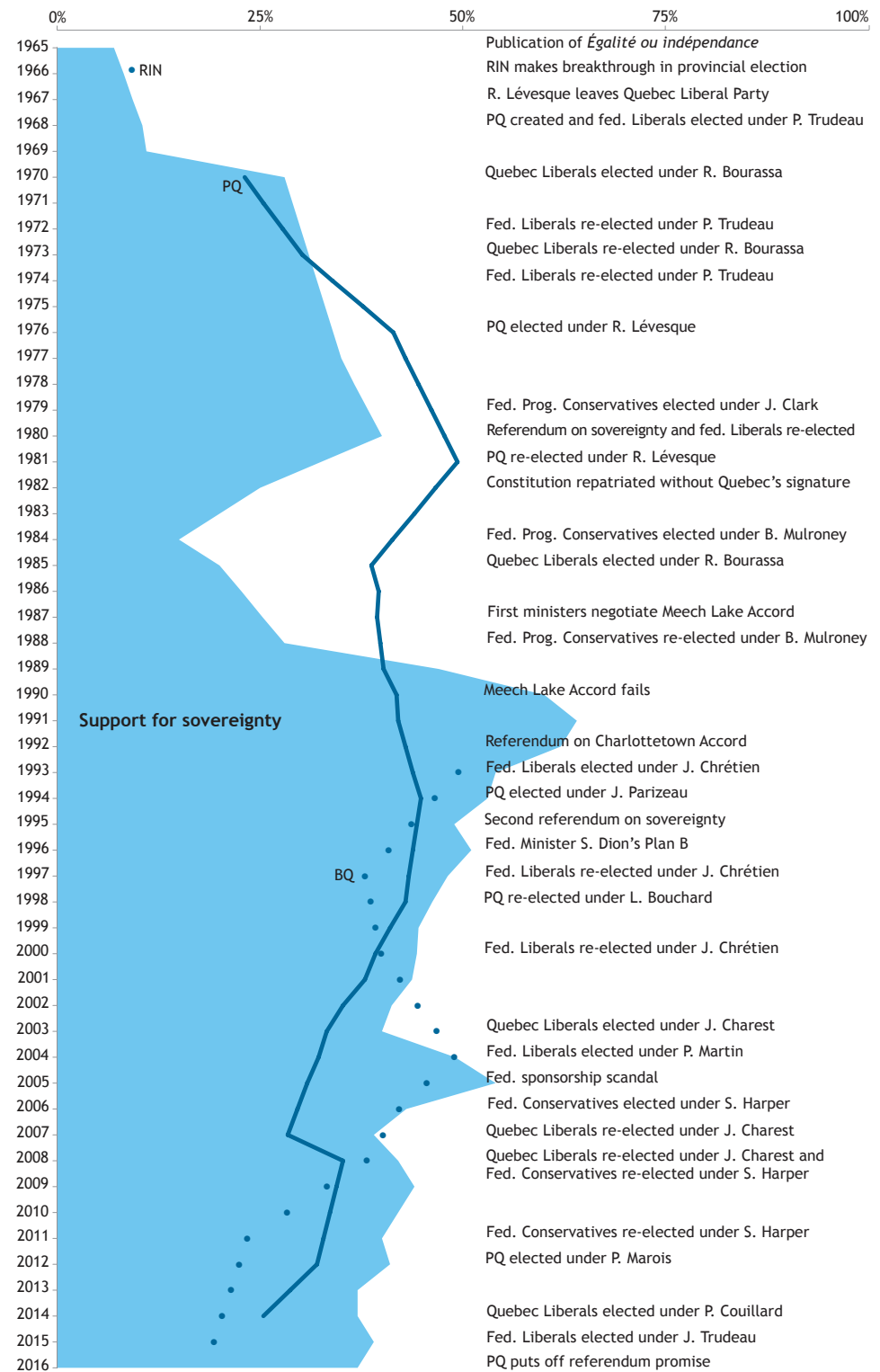
When Lucien Bouchard took the reins of the PQ and became premier, after Jacques Parizeau’s stunning resignation the day after the referendum loss of 1995, he had high hopes of reviving support for sovereignty. But six years later, it stood at around 45 percent. Still more telling, Jean Chrétien’s Liberals won more votes than the Bloc Québécois in the November 2000 federal election. When he stepped down in January 2001, Bouchard made the following remarks:

I acknowledge that my efforts to quickly revive the debate on the national question have been in vain. Therefore, it has not been possible to move towards a referendum on the fast schedule we would have liked...I fully accept my share of responsibility for having failed to rekindle the flame and persuade our fellow citizens of the seriousness of the situation.⁶⁸

In the wake of the 1995 referendum, support for sovereignty in the polls fluctuated significantly with events such as Stéphane Dion’s “Plan B,” the Supreme Court decision on Quebec’s right to secede and the *Clarity Act*, and then the federal sponsorship scandal in 2004. But the general trend was downward. As sociologist Claire Durand notes, “Some events led to an increase in support, but their impact was not long-lived.”⁶⁹

Some observers emphasize the PQ’s leadership problems as the reason for the decline, while others point to the fragmentation of the sovereigntist forces. Although these factors had an impact, I believe they mask the root causes.

FIGURE 3
Evolution of support for sovereignty and electoral results for the Parti Québécois, the Bloc Québécois and Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale



Sources: Author's calculations based on Elections Canada and the Directeur général des élections du Québec; for 1965-85, É. Cloutier, J.-H. Guay and D. Latouche, *Le virage* (Montreal, Québec Amérique, 1992); for 1989-2017, Léger (http://www.leger360.com/admin/upload/publi_pdf/HDIV-Référendaire-Quebec.pdf/).

In almost every area, the living conditions of Quebec francophones have caught up to those of anglophones in Quebec and the rest of Canada.

The first is the fading relevance of the factors that fed the sovereignty movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In almost every area, the living conditions of Quebec francophones have caught up to those of anglophones in Quebec and the rest of Canada. As I observed in 2003, the “grapes of wrath” have disappeared.⁷⁰

For example, according to demographer Raymond Bourbeau’s analysis of the data,⁷¹ the gap in life expectancy between Quebec francophones and Quebec anglophones (men and women) narrowed from almost five years in the late 1950s to a few months in 2001; the life expectancy gap between Quebec and Ontario shrank from three years in 1970 to a few weeks in 2011.

Economist Pierre Fortin draws a similar picture with respect to incomes.⁷² In 1960, “the average salary of unilingual francophone men was only 52 percent that of anglophone men, bilingual or unilingual.” In 2008, “Quebecers’ overall standard of living was 99 percent that of Ontarians.” Within Quebec, the position of francophones improved dramatically. As for business ownership, “francophone-owned companies now account for two-thirds of employment in Quebec, compared with less than half in 1960. We are much more ‘masters in our own houses’ than in 1960.” The same holds for social development: “After 50 years, we can conclude that Quebec is at the top in North America in this area...the rate of absolute poverty and the degree of disposable income inequality are lower here than anywhere else on the continent.” Former PQ minister Joseph Facal observed in 2010 that “it is an undeniable fact that Quebec has been able to modernize and prosper within the Canadian political system.”⁷³ Indeed, Quebec is “one of the West’s greatest success stories,” in his opinion.

More generally, Canada has an enviable image: according to the United Nations, it is among the world’s top 10 countries for quality of life; it ranks second in the world on the Social Progress Index, which measures human rights and the treatment of minorities;⁷⁴ and it is eighth in the World Happiness Report.⁷⁵ In foreign policy, the federal government’s positions have been in step with Quebec’s. Examples include free trade (1988), the war in Iraq (2003) and the intervention in the Balkans (1992-2004). This meeting of the minds contrasts with the tensions that swirled around the conscription crises during the two world wars, which led to the Quebec City riots of 1918 and the plebiscite of 1942. The second factor relates to federal governance. The *BNA Act* granted the federal government what were the most important powers at the time: customs, mail, taxation, the army. The areas of provincial jurisdiction — health, education, natural resources — were the realm of charities, the churches and business in the nineteenth century. Over the course of 150 years, the situation has reversed:

the modern state has become, first and foremost, a great provider of health care and education services, and it regulates businesses and resource management. Customs and tariff issues have lost much of their importance with globalization. The power of disallowance and the declaratory power — provisions of the *BNA Act* that violate the spirit of federalism — have long fallen into disuse. And the unspecified powers actually benefit the provinces, the environment being a good example.⁷⁶ Moreover, asymmetry has become the rule in many areas in recent years; it is accepted that the provinces, and Quebec in particular, should diverge in their management of public services and in certain programs.

Aaron Schneider argues that Canada is already one of the world’s most decentralized federations — politically, fiscally and administratively.⁷⁷ According to OECD data, the size of Canada’s central government relative to all public administrations is particularly modest (Canada ranks 29th out of 33 countries by this measure, below the US and Australia).⁷⁸

The sovereigntist case therefore faces another difficulty with respect to the federal government: how can it be argued that Canada wants to “smother” Quebec when the country is relatively decentralized and the federal government avoids conflict with the provinces on some issues?

Most paradoxically, it could be suggested that it was Quebec, where support for sovereignty was already present in the 1960s and became a threat in the 1970s, that helped change things. Here we might ask some questions that are hypothetical but not irrelevant. For example, in the 1960s, would English Canada have accepted Trudeau’s official bilingualism, even reluctantly, had it not sensed the mounting sovereigntist threat? In the mid-1970s, would Robert Bourassa have made French the official language — perhaps unwillingly — had he not been pushed to do so by a stronger commitment on the part of his sovereigntist opponents? Lastly, it can hardly be denied that the emergence of “Quebec Inc.” received a boost from the economic nationalism championed by premiers Jacques Parizeau and Bernard Landry, and driven more broadly by the bold sovereigntist enterprise.

By virtue of its existence and its relative strength, the sovereignty movement therefore yielded economic, social and cultural benefits, even if it did not realize its goals *per se*. But, in a cruel twist, its successes may also have precipitated its decline. In other words, it might be said that the movement served its purpose without achieving its ends. The 1963 study coordinated by Pinard, quoted above, had already noted this odd tendency: while at the time barely 10 percent of respondents intended to vote for a “separatist” party, 46 percent believed

Canada is already one of the world’s most decentralized federations — politically, fiscally and administratively.

It was Quebec, where support for sovereignty was already present in the 1960s and became a threat in the 1970s, that helped change things.

that “separatism had done more than other nationalist movements to make French Canadians aware of their own problems.”⁷⁹

The third factor in the decline of the sovereignty movement involves Quebec’s demographics. Until the late twentieth century, the language divide was principally between francophones and anglophones. However, as a result of increased immigration intended to offset the aging of the population, the proportion of Quebec residents whose mother tongue is neither French nor English (allophones) has gradually increased. The francophone “we” (78.2 percent of the population) no longer faces a prosperous, predominantly anglophone managerial minority (now 8.3 percent) buttressed politically, economically and culturally by Canada’s anglophone majority. Instead, it faces a fragmented, largely allophone minority (13.5 percent) of diverse ethnic origins and religious practices, which is often more economically disadvantaged than the francophone majority.⁸⁰ Marco Micone, a Quebec writer of Italian origin, references this shift in his poem “Speak What” (1989), which complains that the francophone majority treats neo-Quebecers as the anglophone elite once treated the francophone majority. The traditional linguistic duality has therefore become partially obsolete. And in some cases, expressed fears of religious minorities have lent the sovereignty movement an ethnic or even “racist” cast that is out of step with the PQ’s progressive past. At least, this is how some read it.⁸¹

Last but not least, there is a fourth factor: as long as there was a barebones, classical liberal state, as in the nineteenth century, there were few clashes between the federal government and the Quebec government, and the risk of conflict remained low. As the federal government gradually became more Keynesian, particularly under Mackenzie King (in response to the challenges of the Great Depression), while the Quebec government remained basically non-Keynesian (from 1930 to 1960), the tension increased a notch but still remained relatively low. However, when the Quebec government also became interventionist (after 1960), the level of confrontation rose to its highest pitch, as if one of the governments were now superfluous: Quebec nation-building then clashed repeatedly with Canadian nation-building.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, however, things have been quite different. Like many people across the Western world, Quebecers believe public services are poorly administered⁸² and complain about the tax burden. Pierre Fortin comments: “Our feelings towards the Quebec state have cooled considerably over time. In 1960, the state was the bearer of our hopes. Today, having become ubiquitous, it is a source of considerable frustration.”⁸³ In practical terms, when both governments, under the pressure of neoliberalism, stop ramping up state intervention, the tension between

As for sovereignty, it no longer captures the imagination. Many citizens have become cynical about the state and politics in general.

the two nation-building efforts ebbs. This was particularly apparent during Stephen Harper's tenure as prime minister. Suddenly, jurisdictional disputes and constitutional issues were no longer the stuff of daily headlines.

As for sovereignty, which consists in transferring all powers to the Quebec state, it no longer captures the imagination. Many citizens have become cynical about the state and politics in general. Even among artists and creative people, the enthusiasm has waned. For example, the writer Michel Tremblay and the playwright Robert Lepage expressed skepticism about the idea in 2006,⁸⁴ to the surprise and disappointment of the movement's leaders. It is also symptomatic that much of Quebec literature no longer revolves around "we" or "Québécois"; as elsewhere, the focus is on the "I," gender identity and interpersonal relations.

When we piece all these factors together, the erosion of support for sovereignty is no longer a mystery. Sociological, economic, linguistic and cultural factors over which the sovereignist leaders have little or no influence have shattered their rhetoric. The sovereignty movement has retreated into a defensive nationalism, unable to align its aspirations with a new reality that is as ambiguous as the pre-1960 situation, but in a different way, undermined by other contradictions. As a result, sovereignty is no longer a central issue. For many Quebecers, it is not a necessity anymore: it has gone back to being a wish or simply a possibility, an "insurance policy." This transformation profoundly changes the partisan dynamics and, according to some, risks mortgaging the "Quebec model."⁸⁵

Conclusion

IF WE LOOK AT THE HISTORY I have outlined through the lens of Gérard Bouchard's concepts of equivocal thinking and organic thinking, a unifying thread, even a rationality, emerges. Quebecers' ambivalence derives from either the fact that when the pros and cons of their situation within Canada are weighed, the scale never tips clearly in either direction, or the fact that they cannot readily weave all aspects of their situation into a coherent whole. When we identify the core reasons⁸⁶ that drive each side, the various episodes in the Quebec-Canada relationship become comprehensible, and we don't need to resort to concepts of alienation and manipulation. I believe I have explained why the sovereignist enterprise was marginal or non-existent throughout the long 1760-1960 period. The rise of sovereignty and its plateauing in the 1960-95 period are also explicable. And there is nothing mysterious about its slide in the most recent period, 1995-2017. In each of these cases, there is no true enigma. It is also clear that those who blame the PQ's leaders for the setbacks and the decline of the sovereignist option are probably

overlooking deeper causes — ones that are much more significant than the missteps of Pauline Marois, Lucien Bouchard, Gilles Duceppe, or even René Lévesque.

To be sure, I have not conclusively demonstrated my initial hypothesis. Some might have objections, or at least reservations and qualifications, about the evidence. However, I believe the analysis is cogent enough to merit defence and discussion. It is also consistent with what the political scientist Louis Balthazar wrote in *Nouveau bilan du nationalisme québécois*:

In fact, Quebec nationalism has rarely achieved the intensity needed to entirely overshadow other concerns. Almost always, it was experienced by the majority of the population in an ambiguous way. . . On every occasion, sovereigntist nationalism has subsided into support for greater autonomy, i.e. an assertion of Quebec identity within a larger framework.⁸⁷

Based on this review of the history, can we venture any forecasts? If we accept the hypothesis that has served as my unifying theme, the answer is simple: not really. Equivocal thinking, by definition, can't solve problems. The process is stalled, for equivocal thinking is incapable of reconciling the opposing elements of a situation. It is therefore difficult to say where it will lead in the long term.

On the other hand, we can look to the near future and consider how the latest episode in the constitution file can be interpreted in light of the concepts used in this analysis.

In a detailed, nearly 200-page document titled *Quebecers, Our Way of Being Canadian*, published on June 1, 2017, the Couillard government offered to re-open the constitutional dialogue with its Canadian partners and to “rebuild the conditions needed for constructive dialogue.”⁸⁸ The “affirmation statement”⁸⁹ opens with Robert Bourassa’s words from 1990: “Québec is free to make its own choices and able to shape its own destiny,” an assertion of the right to self-determination. It goes on to say that francophones are the majority, but there is an English-speaking community “which has certain specific rights and prerogatives.” It underscores the existence of Indigenous nations and of cultural diversity, and concludes with this call: “Canada must recognize Québec if Quebecers are to see themselves better reflected in Canada.” This document clearly encapsulates the Quebec Liberals’ moderate nationalism.

Despite its tame approach — it contained no timetable and no ultimatums — the document received a frosty response from Justin Trudeau, probably because his government can see no way to reconcile the aspirations of Quebec, the other

For many Quebecers, sovereignty is not a necessity anymore: it has gone back to being a wish or simply a possibility, an “insurance policy.”

provinces and Indigenous communities. Clearly, the Trudeau government fears that another failure would give the sovereignty movement a boost and possibly spark tensions between the regions. Perhaps it has not forgotten that, after the failure of Meech Lake and Charlottetown, the Progressive Conservative Party was virtually wiped out, electing only two MPs.

Quebec's argument has its flaws. According to the document, "For most Quebecers, this multiple sense of belonging is not seen as a contradiction but as something to be valued."⁹⁰ I would suggest, however, that the two allegiances do not always sit well with each other. In a large-scale survey of more than 25,000 Canadians conducted by Statistics Canada in 2013,⁹¹ around 93 percent in every province except Quebec said they were "proud to be Canadian," regardless of the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. In Quebec, the results were quite different: pride in being Canadian was only 74 percent among all Quebecers, and only 69 percent among francophones. Among francophone university graduates, the number was just 53 percent! The tension remains palpable.

In fact, what is missing from the Quebec government's position is a clear and compelling supporting argument. The document expresses it metaphorically: Quebecers should no longer feel like "exiles" in their own land. This picks up on political scientist Guy Laforest's image: "an internal exile is someone who feels uncomfortable, who lives like a foreigner in his own country."⁹² It's a fine image, but it is not rooted in reality – at least for the substantial majority of Quebecers, who are lukewarm about resuming the constitutional debate. The rationale remains legal, symbolic, in the realm of the abstract, especially in light of Philippe Couillard's retort to sovereignists in 2014:

*If we were humiliated, oppressed, in dire straits, we could make a collective decision to do without all this. [But] we are a free people, a happy people, a prosperous people that is claiming its prosperity and modernity here in Quebec. I see no reason to deprive Quebecers of their Canadian citizenship.*⁹³

This is a weak argument: how can the "happy exile" convince its Canadian partners to engage in a long, weighty, high-risk debate? But the rest of Canada is also hamstrung: it advocates openness on the international stage but is unable to secure the signature of one of its founding peoples on its Constitution. When *Quebecers, Our Way of Being Canadian* was debated in the National Assembly, sovereignists were, naturally enough, quick to see it as an admission of defeat. "The very existence of this document is an acknowledgement — an acknowledgement of Canada's failure to recognize the Quebec nation," said Jean-Francois Lisée.⁹⁴ However, the sovereignists are trapped in their

The sovereignty movement appears incapable of uniting the various tendencies it embraced in the past and reconciling their positions.

own impotence. In little more than 10 years, the PQ has had four leaders and a multitude of strategies but has steadily lost support. In the mid-2000s, the left distanced itself by creating Québec Solidaire, a party that supports sovereignty, to be sure, but is more concerned with social issues than constitutional questions. In 2011, François Legault, once a major figure in the PQ, founded the Coalition Avenir Québec, a rival party that rejects sovereignty. The PQ no longer commands the activist spirit or electoral strength it once did. The sovereignty movement appears incapable of uniting the various tendencies it embraced in the past and reconciling their positions. It, too, finds itself in an equivocal position.

This look at the present completes the picture. Our discussion of the difficulty that both sides have encountered in devising solutions for the future sheds light on the nature of equivocal thinking. It isn't feeble, immature or unimaginative thinking. If it fails to reconcile contradictions, it is because they appear irreconcilable, at least with the tools at hand, often themselves too contradictory. No matter which way you look at the problem, no clear and convincing solution presents itself.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can of course discern mistakes, blind spots, weaknesses and indeed signs of alienation or manipulation in equivocal thinking. But this telescoping is itself misleading. When we try to reconstruct, as best as we can, what was available to the political actors, intellectuals and ordinary citizens, it becomes very clear how difficult it is to frame a project that can hold popular support over a relatively extended period. Ultimately, what emerges is a compromise negotiated behind closed doors by political elites.

For the future, I would offer a word of caution: perhaps we will have to wait for new questions to be asked, or for a new context to emerge, before the two sides can find positions and solutions that are still unimaginable today.

Notes

This article expands on ideas outlined in “L'échec d'un mythe : une relecture de la relation Québec-Canada,” *Argument* 19, no. 2 (2017). The ideas were also presented in “L'énigme du Québec,” a paper delivered on June 7, 2017, at the Université de Sherbrooke summer school session “Les 150 ans de la fédération canadienne.” In this translation, wherever possible, we used the published versions of quotations. In other cases, the translation is ours.

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