



# Parallel lives: The Québec–Canada estrangement in retrospect

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One solution to marital breakdown is to live separately under one roof. Doing so can be motivated by financial expediency, the need to save appearances, or both. Such pragmatic arrangements are usually marked by indifference to the partner's existence and a fixation on one's self-interest. This brief description encapsulates the relationship between Québec and the rest of Canada (ROC) over the past 40 years. The ROC has been largely disinterested in what goes on in Québec, whether from a political, cultural, or intellectual perspective, unless, of course, its own self-interest is involved. Without doubt, it is better informed about happenings and trends in the United States with which it certainly feels a greater affinity. The same can be said about Québec, which has made much of its *américanité* over the years.

Today, universities across the country grant degrees at the highest level to specialists of Canada who do not know the other official language. I'm not referring to the ability to speak or follow a conversation, which requires a higher level of proficiency, but simply a reading knowledge of that language. Québec or the ROC is just not part of these unilingual scholars' mental map. They either ignore the other culture's distinctiveness or assume that what they write or say about their own culture applies to the other as well. Learned societies, mostly organized along this linguistic divide, entrench such attitudes. It should come as no surprise, then, that the print and electronic media generally turn a blind eye to events beyond the language barrier. In the early 19th century, Austrian statesman Count Metternich described Italy as merely a geographical expression. Can the same be said today of Canada?

## A BRIEF PERIOD OF UNDERSTANDING AND DIALOGUE

And yet, this was not always the case. The early 1960s witnessed a tragically brief spring of mutual understanding and dialogue. The frustration that had built up over the years in Québec regarding its subordinate linguistic, political, and constitutional position led to the formation of parties calling openly for independence from Canada and to acts of violence against "English" hegemony. In response, Prime Minister Lester Pearson instituted the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, signalling the desire for a new partnership. As co-chair of the commission, he named André Laurendeau, a nationalist who advocated greater power for Québec as the seat of French Canadian culture in North America. In 1967, Premier John Robarts of Ontario lent legitimacy to Québec's desire for change by convening the Confederation for Tomorrow conference of provincial premiers.

In 1968, Laurendeau's untimely death and Pierre Elliott Trudeau's election as prime minister scotched the commission's role as a site of dialogue and renewal. Although Cabinet ministers such as Mitchell Sharp, Jean-Luc Pepin, Paul Martin, and Jean Marchand, and even Opposition leader Robert Stanfield, shared Pearson's broad views on constitutional change, Trudeau did not. In the face of the

electoral frenzy unleashed by their charismatic leader, these ministers chose to take a back seat. Trudeau, for his part, rejected increased powers for Québec, arguing that all provinces were equal. None could therefore claim a special status. His only interest in the Constitution was its patriation from London. He was adamant that the sole cause of discontent in Québec was linguistic. Accordingly, he brought in legislation declaring Canada officially bilingual. The *Official Languages Act*, as well as the series of provincial laws recognizing minority-language rights, did nothing, however, to allay anxieties about linguistic assimilation in Québec, fed by a declining birth rate among francophones and immigrant children massively choosing English-language schools.

Meanwhile, an equally charismatic figure, former provincial Cabinet minister René Lévesque, left the Québec Liberal Party to found the sovereigntist Parti québécois (PQ). He and Trudeau had diametrically opposed views, not only on language rights and increased powers for Québec, but on the very concept of culture. For Trudeau, culture was a matter of personal choice, as highlighted in his 1971 statement on multiculturalism: while Canada had two official languages, he declared, it had no official culture. In this regard, individuals were free to express their own preferences with varying degrees of state support. For Lévesque, culture was above all a collective expression. At stake for him was Québec's ability to maintain its distinctiveness in a massively English-speaking continent. This required not only legislation protecting the French language, but the full instruments of statehood to ensure its development.

### **POLITICAL HIGH NOON**

The 1970s were the high noon of political life pitting the two protagonists against each other. There were many episodes in this high-stakes drama: Trudeau's invocation of the *War Measures Act* in reaction to the FLQ crisis; the failure to reach an accord at the constitutional talks held in Victoria in 1971; the election of a Parti québécois government; the various language laws enacted by the Québec National Assembly, culminating in the *Charter of the French Language*; the marginalization of the commission headed by Jean-Luc Pepin and John Robarts with its radical vision of a reformed Confederation; the patriation of the Constitution with its reinforced *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. From these dramatic struggles Trudeau eventually emerged victorious. The subsequent failure of the Meech Lake Accord, as well as the unsuccessful referendums held across Canada in 1992 and in Québec in 1995, merely prolonged the drama without changing its outcome. In the end, the public on both sides of the linguistic fault line became thoroughly weary of the constitutional question. But the damage in terms of mutual understanding and encounter was done.

We need to remember that what set the whole process in motion was Prime Minister Pearson's response to unrest in Québec. At each subsequent stage, however, new actors intervened to press for their undeniably legitimate claims, each of which needed to be addressed separately: women, immigrants, Indigenous peoples, other racialized groups, and the disabled—willingly or not—deflected Canadians' attention from the Québec question. And yet, with the possible exception of the First Nations, no other body had the power to disrupt the country as did Québec with its territory, its government, its distinct legal system, and its culture. The message from the ROC could not have been clearer: Québec had no greater claim than any other province; the Québécois were merely one of many peoples comprising Canada; and no particular mechanism was required to protect their culture, apart from their own will to perpetuate it. That was the positive message. The negative one, propagated in speeches, articles, and editorials, was that Québec and the Québécois were variously anglophobic, xenophobic, antisemitic, racist, illiberal, fascistic, narrow-minded, or isolationist.

Québec and the ROC now lead parallel lives. The arguments of the past have been suppressed, but not forgotten. There is no love lost between the two. They can choose to drift further apart until another inevitable crisis erupts, or they can begin to rediscover what each has to offer the other. In either case, the ball is in the ROC's court, where it has lain unattended since the 1960s. ■