

## **THE FUTURE OF QUEBEC'S CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IN THE POST- REFERENDUM CONTEXT**

*Gaëtan Tremblay*

In a referendum held on 30 October 1995, Quebecers were asked if they supported the idea of Quebec sovereignty coupled with a form of partnership with Canada. The results were so close (49.6% Yes, 50.4% No) that the winners almost felt as if they had lost and the losers that they had won. Up until the week preceding the referendum, only a few sovereignists dared hope for such a result, while the federalists were convinced that they would win hands down.

Throughout the campaign, the debate was a model of civility, and Quebecers are proud to be able to show the world that it is possible to discuss such a delicate issue as a country's future in a democratic manner. It is unfortunate that the bitter words of Premier Jacques Parizeau, commenting on the defeat of the sovereignist option ('It's simple. We were beaten by money and the ethnic vote'), tarnished this image. It is unfortunate that this declaration lent a narrowly nationalistic and mean-spirited air to the votes of thousands of individuals who, while defining themselves as sovereignists, have long become aware of Quebec's diversity and have adopted a discourse of inclusion rather than exclusion. It must be pointed out, however, that notwithstanding an undeniably tense post-referendum climate, at the time of writing (May 1996) there have been no violent outbursts. This is surely a sign

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of Quebec society's political maturity. One hopes that this attitude will always hold sway.

My article consists of four parts. First, I will discuss the tensions which arose arisen after the 1995 vote. This will be followed by a sketch of the three major political roads that the constitutional crisis could take. Thirdly, I will examine the current strategies adopted by Canadian and Quebec governments. And, lastly, I will discuss the challenges and stakes involved in the development of Quebec culture and communications in the post-referendum context.

#### **POST-REFERENDUM TENSIONS**

The close results of the referendum convinced many protagonists on both sides of the issue of the strong likelihood, indeed the inevitability, of a sovereign Quebec. (According to the last pan-Canadian survey, however, it would appear that in English Canada the 1995 scare has already been forgotten. Only a third of English Canadians believe that a majority of the population will support sovereignty in a future referendum, whereas 52% of Quebecers think the opposite. And while 59% of Quebecers believe that Quebec will one day be a sovereign country, only 37% of Canadians share this opinion (*Le Devoir*, 26 March 1996).

While sovereignists impatiently await the next referendum to get their revenge, a number of federalists have begun to erect scenarios in which they would remain Canadians even in the event of a vote in favour of sovereignty. This latter involves a debate over partitioning Quebec territory. In addition, the long-time debate over language policy has been rekindled.

#### **PARTITIONING QUEBEC**

Various federalist groups, composed largely, though not uniquely, of Anglophones, have raised the possibility, in the media and public assemblies, of partitioning Quebec in the event of a sovereignist victory. Declarations by certain federal ministers, which I will discuss below, have encouraged this orientation. The logic of partitionist arguments is simple: 'if Canada is divisible,' they argue, 'so is Quebec.' It follows that all regions, not to mention Montreal neighbourhoods, in which the majority of votes were federalist, should have the right to remain within Canada. The result would

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be an independent Quebec, which they propose to call Laurentie, minus Montreal, the Outaouais and Estrie regions, and northern Quebec. In other words, Quebec would be reduced to a more or less narrow strip of land bordering the Saint Lawrence and Saguenay rivers. This has the air of an ethnic partition, creating a reservation for Francophones.

Some well-known English Canadians, such as the philosopher Charles Taylor and John Ciaccia, a Liberal member of the Quebec national assembly, have publicly spoken out against these proposals. This rhetoric of division is dangerous in the view of moderate federalists, more inclined to seek a compromise or consensus within the framework of a reformed Canadian federalism. Partitionism, they argue, is the expression of Anglophone frustration; but it is a defeatist solution that takes the inevitability of sovereignty for granted and encourages misunderstanding and intolerance.

Needless to say, sovereignists stoutly reject partitionist hypotheses. They point to the fact of the historical existence of Quebec society and territory. Canada is a political creation, the result of an agreement between Upper Canada, Lower Canada, and the Maritime provinces. Quebec (Lower Canada) existed before the Canadian federation. Its future will be determined by a democratic vote which all, winner and loser alike, must respect.

Others, both federalists and sovereignists, point to the unrealistic nature of the partitionist scenario. How are the lines of demarcation to be decided? Will certain of Montreal's streets belong to Canada and others to Quebec? And why not certain street sections? Ultimately, partitionism represents a denial of Quebec's right to self-determination, even though it was implicitly recognized by the absence of any legal contestation of two previous referendums on the question of Quebec's future.

Partitionist rhetoric is clearly the expression of a profound malaise in Quebec's Anglophone community. It does not represent an acceptable solution for the vast majority of Quebecers. Rather, it suggests that bridges need to be rebuilt in order to establish a calm dialogue among the various communities making up Quebec society.

### **LANGUAGE POLICY**

It is a known fact that Parti Québécois founder and former Quebec Premier René Lévesque only reluctantly agreed to adopt Bill 101, which designated

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anew French as the official language of Quebec, and various measures intended to ensure that the French language would flourish in North America (the **Charte de la Langue Française**, adopted in 1977). While he recognized the necessity of doing so, he deplored the need to rely on legislation in this matter. Since its adoption, Bill 101 has undergone several modifications in the wake of Supreme Court of Canada judgements ruling that various aspects of the Bill conflicted with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Last 23 March, the inter-departmental committee mandated by Louise Beaudoin, Minister of Culture and Communication, to evaluate the evolution of the French language in Quebec, released its report. It concluded:

A lot of progress has been made but much remains to be done ... The objective of making French the operative language of all public activities in Quebec is far from being attained. This situation is particularly noticeable in the Montreal area (and probably in the border regions), where the use of French in public communications between all Quebecers, be they workers, consumers, or citizens, is less frequent than elsewhere in Quebec.  
(quoted by O'Neill 1996).

The language question has always been a thorny issue in Quebec. Francophones sense the fragility of their position in the Anglophone sea of North America. And Anglophones have considerable difficulty accepting the restrictions imposed by law with respect to signs and access to English language schools, for example. Robert Bourassa's Liberal government often got its fingers burned on the language issue. At present, the majority of Quebec's politicians, both in power and in opposition, feel that the current linguistic compromise is satisfactory and are in favour of maintaining the status quo. But voices on both sides of the issue are demanding change. Some observers, such as the political scientist Josée Legault, and Michel Plourde, former president of the Conseil de la Langue Française, argue that French is in danger on the island of Montreal and are calling for corrective measures. Others such as Montreal Mayor Pierre Bourque argue to the contrary that the Montreal area's economic revival requires the softening of Bill 101. For its part, the government is reluctant to open this Pandora's box and is attempting to calm the waters and defer the debate. In a recent speech before representatives of Montreal's Anglophone community, Lucien Bouchard, the current Premier, reaffirmed that French is, and will remain, the official language of Quebec; but he also attempted to reassure Anglophones by

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recognizing their historical contribution to Quebec culture and offered to guarantee their rights in the constitution of an independent Quebec.

## **THE POLITICAL OPTIONS**

What path might the Canadian constitutional crisis take from this moment on? Not having a crystal ball, I will refrain from offering prognoses. Though it is possible for analysis to identify major trends, the evolution of political situations involves too many factors and too many imponderables for the articulation of credible forecasts. Experience all too often demonstrates the futility of prospective analyses for one to embark upon this road with any degree of seriousness and credibility. In this light, let me simply present three major directions that the Canadian constitutional crisis might take, without entering into details or evaluating the likelihood of any of them occurring.

### *The status quo*

The first scenario: things stay as they are at the moment. By this I do not mean that the situation will not evolve, but that it will not lead to any constitutional change or to any structural change in the relationship between Quebec and the rest of Canada. This has been the case for the past thirty years. Quebec continues to express its frustration and present its demands, and the federal government, like the rest of Canada, continues to treat them as unacceptable, all the while hoping that the Quebec independence movement will eventually still itself and, out of weariness, abandon its demands. This is the scenario preferred by the central government and a majority of English Canadians. It is, however, a solution rejected by the majority of Quebecers, if one adds the sovereignist vote to that of reformist federalists.

### *Constitutional reform*

The second possibility would see Quebec and the rest of Canada elaborate a compromise acceptable to all regarding a reform of the Canadian constitution, which, for example, would recognize the distinct character of Quebec society, guarantee it a veto with regard to future amendments, and initiate a redistribution of jurisdictional authority which gave more powers to the Quebec government. This was the option explored by the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords. As we all know, the former was defeated by the opposition of Newfoundland's Premier and that of Manitoba aboriginals. The

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latter was rejected in a 1992 referendum. English Canadians voted against it because they felt it gave too much to Quebec; Quebecers rejected it because they felt that it didn't give them enough.

This scenario is preferred by many Quebec federalists, a small minority of English Canadians sensitive to Quebec's aspirations, and, we are told, might be acceptable to so-called 'soft' sovereignists to the extent that the accord responded to Quebec's historical demands.

But the results of the most recent Canada-wide survey indicate that the rest of Canada is not inclined to make major concessions to Quebec (**Le Devoir** 26 March 1996).

### ***Quebec sovereignty***

Galvanized by the close results of the latest referendum and the significant progress made by the Yes option since the 1991 electoral vote (40% Yes, 60% No), sovereignists are convinced of the need for a third referendum, which they believe they will win: Quebec will become fully sovereign. The option put forward by the Parti Québécois, under the leadership of its president, Premier Lucien Bouchard, consists of an offer of partnership or association with the rest of Canada, the terms of which would be negotiated by the federal and Quebec governments. It could lead to the adoption of a common currency, dual citizenship, a defence policy, a free trade agreement, etc.

This option is obviously the one privileged by hardline sovereignists. And since the 1995 vote, it is being taken seriously by a growing number of Quebec as well as Canadian federalists, with the latter attempting to oppose it by invoking partitionism, the refusal to negotiate, and even reprisals and legal contestation.

It needs to be pointed out, however, that, according to opinion surveys, a majority of Quebecers do not want to go as far as Quebec sovereignty and would be satisfied with a thorough renewal of the Canadian union.

### **CURRENT STRATEGIES**

In light of these options, what are the post-referendum strategies currently being pursued by the governments of Canada and Quebec?

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### ***The federal government's strategy***

The strategy adopted by Jean Chrétien's Liberal government has two facets. The first claims to meet Quebec's fundamental demands by recognizing that it is a distinct society, coupling this recognition with the use of its veto power, and getting out of the field of manpower training. But the way in which he adopted this position was denounced by sovereignists in Quebec and Ottawa, and was viewed at the very least as unsatisfactory by Quebec reformist federalists, including the Quebec Liberal Party.

Firstly, the recognition of the distinct character of Quebec society was denounced as being void of meaning because, on the one hand, it was adopted merely on the basis of a parliamentary vote and not a constitutional amendment, and, at the same time, the rest of the country was promised that this measure would not entail according additional power to Quebec, on the other.

Secondly, the promised veto power is not really one at all. It is, rather, a promise that the Federal government will exercise its veto whenever one of the provinces openly displays its opposition to a given amendment proposal. Even then, there is no question of entrenchment in the Constitution, and the conditions of expression of provincial disagreement which would push the federal government to exercise its veto have not been clearly defined.

Lastly, the promised evacuation of the field of manpower training is still being negotiated and it is not all clear that the central power is really inclined to remove itself entirely from this arena, in which double jurisdiction has been denounced as inefficient and costly by all Quebec actors, management as well as unions.

The second facet of the federal strategy is well-illustrated by the designation of Stéphane Dion, professor of political science and political newcomer, as Minister of Federal-Provincial Relations. Dion is well-known in Quebec as a hardline federalist satisfied with the status quo and little inclined to making the smallest concession to Quebec demands. Among other things, Professor Dion has already said that Quebecers were tempted by sovereignism because they were not suffering enough economically, hinting in barely veiled terms of a strategy of economic reprisals against Quebec. Since his nomination, he has also made a number of provocative declarations that only serve to sanction the idea of partitioning Quebec. In sum, if the unsatisfactory attempts to recognize the distinct character of Quebec are the carrot held out

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by Ottawa, the nomination of Stéphane Dion is the stick being brandished in the face of sovereignists.

#### ***The Quebec government's strategy***

Premier Jacques Parizeau tendered his resignation shortly after the 1995 referendum. The very popular Lucien Bouchard, until then head of the Bloc Québécois in Ottawa, succeeded him as President of the Parti Québécois and Premier of Quebec.

The Bouchard government has elaborated a twofold strategy. Firstly, it loudly proclaims that there will be a third referendum, but not during the present term of office, which, other things being equal, he intends to see through to its end. In other words, there will not be another referendum before two or even three years, but one will take place if the Parti Québécois wins the next election. Until then, the Premier says, he is open to considering any serious offer the federal government might care to make, but he doubts that any will be made.

Secondly, the Bouchard government intends to give immediate priority to cleaning up public finances and to job creation. To this end, last March it convened an economic summit bringing together fifty business, union, education, and cooperative movement leaders. Despite initial difficulties, the summit led to a consensus regarding the complete elimination of the public debt within four years and the initiation of an economic and job creation program under the leadership of Claude Béland, President of the Mouvement Desjardins (Quebec's largest financial institution). This initiative has three dimensions: one dealing with Montreal, Quebec's largest urban centre, headed up by André Bédard of the National Bank, another dealing with job creation, presided over by businessman Jean Coutu, and a third one dealing with the social economy, presided over by Nancy Neamtam, director of the Coalition des Organismes Communautaires de Développement de la Main d'Oeuvre. In addition, a tax commission was also created. The summit will reconvene in Autumn 1996 to follow up on the work begun by this vast economic and job-creation program.

All the participants expressed satisfaction with the operation and the results of the March economic summit, and the Premier praised the merits of the Quebec model of concerted action. To be sure, a more serious evaluation of this cooperative effort can only take place after there are concrete results.

## **THE FUTURE OF CULTURE AND COMMUNICATIONS IN QUEBEC**

Before undertaking an examination of the future of culture and communications in post-referendum Quebec, the debate surrounding these areas, which are at the heart of the Canadian constitutional debate, needs to be historically situated.

### *A quick historical overview*

In Quebec, the traditional view of communications and culture has been that jurisdiction over them should be transferred to Quebec. That the Parti Québécois makes this demand should hardly come as a surprise. It issues logically from its global project. A sovereign Quebec would hold all powers pertaining to communications and culture, just as it would in other sectors.

Even Robert Bourassa's Liberal Party felt that authority in these areas is exclusively a provincial affair. The Allaire Report clearly asserted this view and statements by former minister of culture Lisa Frulla and former minister of communications Lawrence Cannon suggested that the Bourassa government concurred with the Liberal Party and the Allaire Report. But again, there is nothing new here. The Liberal Party's platform, under Robert Bourassa, had already, by the early 1970s, begun to advocate 'cultural sovereignty' for Quebec.

However much this demand may have the unanimous support of Quebec's political representatives, such is not the case in Ottawa. Despite public manifestations of a spirit of collaboration and opening toward the sharing of powers, recent statements by federal ministers, not to mention the wording of a proposed telecommunications bill, hardly give the impression that the federal government is ready to remove itself from this field of jurisdiction. Indeed, the contrary appears to be the case.

After a long conflict begun in the 1920s, provincial power was disarmed by successive decisions made by the country's highest judicial authorities. The Privy Council's 1931 judgment in London concerning federal authority over broadcasting, and those by the Supreme Court in 1977 regarding cable and in 1991 (*Alberta Government Telephone vs Canadian Radiotelevision and Telecommunications Commission*) with respect to telecommunications, combined to confirm the federal government's nearly unshared authority over the regulation of broadcasting and telecommunications in Canada. The new

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Broadcasting Act, adopted in 1991, recognized for the first time the peculiarities of the Francophone market and invited the CRTC (Canadian Radiotelevision and Telecommunications Commission) to regionalize its activities. It did not, however, establish mechanisms allowing for the participation of the provinces in the management of broadcasting in Canada, such as was recommended by the Aird Report.

The Telecommunications Act, adopted in 1993, goes even further: it contains no mention whatsoever of the provinces.

Throughout the 1970s, Quebec intensified the struggle and clearly indicated its intention to play a key governing role with respect to communications activities within its territorial limits. To do so, and with a view to assuming the powers it was demanding, it created a number of institutions similar to those at the federal level. It created its own ministry of communications only a few months after Ottawa. It concretized its bill concerning Radio-Québec by allocating the necessary resources for production and diffusion. It amended the bill concerning the Régie des Services Publics, authorizing it to regulate communications activities. It adopted fiscal measures intended to favour audiovisual production, initiated aid and support programs, etc.

But all these efforts were thwarted by Supreme Court decisions. Quebec lost the legal battle. For all practical purposes, its zone of competence is limited to educational broadcasting and to telephone companies operating solely within its territorial limits. It had to settle for a collaborative relationship with the federal government and be content with whatever consultative role the latter deigned to give it. Through its communications and cultural affairs ministries it still disposes of means for intervening in the domain. But these hardly compare with the power held by Communications Canada and the federal Secretary of State. All that remains for the Régie des Télécommunications is a marginal regulatory role compared to that of the CRTC. And while the SODEC (Société de Développement des Entreprises Culturelles) can offer support to the audiovisual industry, its means are quite limited compared to those of Telefilm Canada.

Despite having its historical demands thwarted and being accorded a scaled-down role in the communications sector, Quebec, via its present government, continues to demand full powers in this area. The Allaire Report, the Arpin Report, and the cultural policy adopted in 1992 all reiterate the same demand: Quebec's full and entire jurisdiction over culture and communications.

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### *Stakes and challenges facing the development of culture and the communication system in post-referendum Quebec*

The political difficulties and lost legal battles notwithstanding, one is forced to recognize that Quebec culture is alive and thriving and the province's communication system, as much with respect to telephony as to broadcasting, is one of the most developed and richest in the world. In the short-term, however, despite its cultural and communications vitality, Quebec, like many other small nations not possessing the full powers of a modern state, must come to terms with a number of stakes and challenges without having any real power in the area of communication and with shared jurisdictional authority and limited means in the cultural arena. These challenges and stakes are the following: 1) the integration of immigrants, 2) budget reductions, 3) technological changes, and 4) free trade agreements and, more generally, the globalization of trade. No matter how its constitutional status evolves, Quebec must find viable ways of dealing with these challenges if it is to survive and develop as an original society possessing its own identity in North America.

#### *1. The integration of immigrants*

As is the case for Canada as a whole, Quebec has received a considerable number of immigrants from every corner of the world. And these immigrants have made important contributions to producing the collective wealth and the cultural development of Quebec society. But Quebec is still a long way from finding the most appropriate means for ensuring the harmonious integration of most of these immigrants into the Francophone majority community. Successful integration entails the adoption of the language of the majority, the sharing of common values, and the feeling of belonging to the same collectivity. This kind of integration also entails a reciprocal desire which must be concretized by an effort to appropriate on the part of the newly arrived on the one hand, and by a warm welcome and a display of openness on the part of those making up the majority community on the other. Integration does not mean a unidirectional assimilation. It is a process of transformation and enrichment of a shared common culture.

Unfortunately, in North America the gravitational force of English is hard to counterbalance and the survival of French requires constant vigilance:

In North America there can be no French life unless it is desired, resolutely and constantly willed, and without taking the necessary steps.

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This will must be both individual and collective. It must also be governmental and constitutional.

(Inter-departmental report on the French language, quoted by O'Neill 1996)

Moreover, while the affirmation of Quebec identity may have evolved, going from ethnic nationalism to a so-called territorial or pluralist nationalism, it needs to be pointed out that many more bridges linking the various communities making up Quebec society need to be built before all its citizens have the same feeling of belonging to a single collectivity. The affirmation of French in Quebec must occur with an awareness of its fragility and in an increasingly positive way, characterized by a spirit of openness and a welcoming attitude.

#### *2. Budget reductions*

The reduction of the public debt involves painful cuts in every area. The fields of culture and communications are no exception. The major public cultural and communications institutions in both Canada and Quebec have often had to accept drastic cuts in their budgets. While in Quebec, Louise Beaudoin, Minister of Culture and Communications, boldly announced, even before the next budget was tabled, that the sums allocated to culture would not be reduced the following year - which appeared to be a reckless declaration, but which was not belied by the latest budget provisions - the latest federal budget imposed greater cuts on cultural programs than on other sectors: a 29% reduction compared to an average reduction of 22%.

To be sure, cultural creation and production are not, and should not be, solely the responsibility of the state. Above all, they depend on the talent of creators and the attachment and pride of the population. But in a small country and small market like Quebec, they cannot rely solely on private sector resources. In order to prosper they need the financial support of public authorities. It is thus necessary to ensure that budget reductions do not go below the critical threshold that would compromise the very survival of certain activity sectors, especially at a time when technological development has raised new challenges for the survival and development of small collectivities and their culture.

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### *3. Technological changes*

The breathtaking progress in communication technologies in the past few decades has increased the possibilities for the transmission of information and cultural products. The broad band networks progressively establishing themselves and ambitious information highway construction projects will require a level of content production exceeding the capacities of single nations, particularly those with modest populations. These networks will look elsewhere for a good portion of the programming they will diffuse. As well, interconnection will allow each citizen - such as the World Wide Web presently does - access to data banks and information throughout the world.

The protection and promotion of cultural diversity, the wealth of the universal heritage, requires first and foremost the adoption of adequate national policies oriented - like those of France, Quebec, and several other countries - toward the recognition and support of creation in all its forms, the improvement of the professional living conditions of artists, support for artistic organizations, the conservation of national heritage, and the elaboration of a development strategy for cultural industries.

### *4. The globalization of trade*

The globalization of cultural trade offers a number of fascinating perspectives. Cultures do not flourish in a vacuum; trade stimulates creativity while fostering understanding among individuals and peoples. But it also raises significant challenges for the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural identities. In light of the formidable production and distribution capacities of certain countries, one is right to fear the reinforcement of the imbalance of trade. National policies will clearly be needed, but they will not be enough. As I argue elsewhere, it is necessary to encourage the creation of an international forum, distinct from GATT, to discuss cultural trade, with a view to adopting rules which would respect the specificities of this sector of human activity (Tremblay 1996).

## **CONCLUSION**

Quebec's future as an original, French-language society in North America has not been taken care of and is not assured. Its constitutional status will no doubt be the object of many more debates and, possibly, other crucial decisions. History shows that Quebec's sovereignist will is a deeply felt

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aspiration, the manifestations and affirmative force of which may change over time but never fade. Those who would wish them away are mistaken and only delaying the adoption of a satisfactory solution.

But whatever the political response to the issue of Quebec's status, the survival and growth of Quebec culture, including its language, are not guaranteed. In light of the importance of current challenges, they will depend on the attachment of Quebecers themselves, individually and collectively, and their determination to provide the necessary resources and creative talent at their disposition. This is not something the state can provide. At most, it can create certain conditions to facilitate matters.

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*May 1996*