

REVIEW: THE FUTURE OF CANADA

Michael Keating

Gibbins, R. and Laforest, G. (eds) (1998), **Beyond the Impasse: Toward Reconciliation**, Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, pb, ISBN 0886451698, viii+446pp.

Following the recent election, Quebec-Canada relations remain at the impasse reached after the 1995 referendum. So this collection, written by scholars from Quebec and English Canada in the aftermath of the referendum, is timely. All are from the reconciliation tendency and the key concept informing the various contributions is partnership. Both federalist and 'sovereigntist' authors agree that the way out must be a return to the idea of a multinational polity in which Quebec is accepted as a partner with the rest of Canada. This idea, while attractive in principle, raises myriad problems in practice, and much of the book is devoted to exploring these. Perhaps the critical one is in defining just who the partners should be, and here the problem is not so much with Quebec as with the other partner or partners. There is little disagreement on accepting the claims of native peoples as a distinct order of government, but no consensus on what will happen to that amorphous entity variously known as 'English Canada' (a term increasingly rejected), 'The Rest of Canada' (ROC) or 'Canada Outside Quebec' (COQ) (Canada hors Québec in the French version).

Will Kymlicka argues for Canada constituting itself as a 'multination state', an unfortunate neologism, which neglects the long and respectable pedigree of the term 'multinational state' and the huge literature it has spawned. Like the other authors he comes up immediately against the problem of ROC, arguing that it would need to get its act together to be a partner to Quebec or to look after its common interests but recognizing that erecting it to the status of a nation in itself would be a contrivance. Guy Laforest argues that Canadian nation-building through the Charter of Rights and the use of the federal spending power has broken the old partnership principle which needs

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to be restored. Arguing for a mix of federal and confederal principles, he insists that dialogue is possible only when each side is able to stand in the shoes of the other.

Kenneth Norrie and Michael Percy, and François Rocher look at the economic aspects of partnership in the event of Quebec sovereignty. Neither chapter thinks that elaborate partnership arrangements would be needed on economic grounds. Norrie and Percy think that the North America Free Trade Agreement will suffice, while Rocher argues for a simple bilateral free trade treaty.

David Scheiderman and Jane Jenson, in separate chapters, both note that the Quebec/Canada difference is not based on fundamental differences of culture or values but on the different ways of constructing the public domain and political space. Quebeckers do not object to the Canadian Charter because they are not liberal, but because it is not their charter. Schneiderman argues for multiple rights regimes, while retaining the basic principles of a liberal order. Kenneth McRoberts, on the issue of linguistic minorities within both Quebec and ROC, advocates reciprocal accords between Quebec and the provinces with Francophone minorities, notably Ontario and New Brunswick.

Alain Noël deals with the issue of social policy and the welfare state, rejecting the idea that centralization is necessarily better for social distribution, but stressing that what matters is the mobilization in favour of social solidarity, and that this may be better done at a more local level.

A series of chapters looks at institutional questions. Roger Gibbins, writing from a Western perspective, puts more emphasis than the other authors on the need for ROC to gain autonomy from Quebec as well as vice versa. Canada has its own equivalent of the West Lothian Question and this constantly bedevils proposals for asymmetrical federalism. Like Gibbins, Rejean Pelletier argues for a more confederal arrangement, giving considerable attention to the need for new joint institutions.

Daniel Latouche makes the argument, rather unusual for a nationalist, that a sovereign Quebec would not necessarily want to occupy all the diplomatic spaces opened up to it, and could in many areas cooperate with Canada or even have Canada speak for it. Ron Watts reminds us that federalism and confederalism come in many forms, allowing a range of solutions to the Canada-Quebec impasse, without polarizing the issue between independence and status quo federalism.

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In their conclusions the editors, true to the spirit of the collection, call for greater understanding and dialogue. Canada should admit that patriating the constitution (from the UK) without Quebec's consent in 1982 was wrong, while Quebec should admit that it does not need a sovereign, independent state. If there was a time for such a fresh start, it was in the aftermath of the 1995 referendum in which the two sides had forced each other to a draw. There was no mandate either for separation or the status quo, but massive evidence that people in Quebec were indeed seeking a new partnership, either by negotiating themselves partly out of Canada, or by leaving it and negotiating themselves partly back in. The political debate since then, however, has not followed the lines set out in this thoughtful collection. Instead, federal and nationalist politicians have sought to score debating points while making the preparations for an eventual divorce. The book was completed before the Supreme Court reference on Quebec's right to secede and its decision, which was seized on as justification by both sides. Its publication shows that there are still thinking Canadians more concerned about how the two sides can live together and is a welcome contribution to the debate, not just on Canada but on the future of multinational states in a globalizing world.

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