

Canada—One Country, Two Nations Still

Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" and the Push For Sovereignty

By Hubert Guindon

A century and a half ago, after the Rebellion of 1827, Lord Durham observed in his famous report that when he looked for the cause of the unrest, he found, to his astonishment, "two nations warring in the bosom of the same state." He proposed a simple remedy: "I believe that tranquility can only be restored by subjecting the province [of Quebec] to the vigorous rule of an English majority."

Were he to return today, Lord Durham would no doubt be astonished to learn that, despite the application of his proposed remedy, his initial observation holds true. Quebec and English Canada still seem to be "two nations warring in the bosom of the same state." Today the viability of Canada as a political entity remains in question. And for the Québécois it is *the* question, the distinctively *Canadian* question.

How are we to understand Quebec and its place (or lack thereof) in Canada? For most English Canadians, the rise of the separatists in Quebec has been inexplicable. Quebec, that quiescent paragon of rural provincialism, has suddenly been transformed into a seat of rabid nationalists intent on the dismemberment of Canada.

If this change seems inexplicable, it is because it does not fit the political stereotypes and cultural myths that English Canadians long used to interpret Quebec as an archaic, traditional society. Ruled by an autocratic clergy fiercely possessive of its own powers and opposed to democracy, modernization, or social progress, Quebec, it was said, was a rural backwater of poverty, illiteracy, and political despotism.

This political/cultural vision of the French in Canada did not emanate

from bigoted Orangemen. Strangely enough, it was the conceptual framework of the politically liberal Anglophone academics of the 1950s, and it was shared and disseminated by the "progressive" French-Canadian intellectuals in and around *Cité Libre* magazine, who then lived in Montreal and went on in the 1960s and 1970s to work mainly in Ottawa....

...[T]he delegitimation of the Canadian state in the eyes of the Québécois is a consequence of the modernization of Quebec.... I explore this issue at somewhat greater length and disentangle some of the separate threads in the modernization process. This necessitates distinguishing between secularization and political alienation.

The Secularization of Quebec Society

At the theoretical level, **secularization** is generally defined in terms of the shrinking importance of magic and religion, as a result of the expansion of science and the scientific method. The narrowing sphere of the sacred corresponds to the expansion of knowledge, at the expense of faith and myth. Yet to conceive of secularization as a fading of myths rather than an emergence of new ones is to miss the point. Moreover, this idealistic view of secularization fails to take account of how the process takes shape and how it unfolds historically....

Secularization is a question of politics, not epistemology. Historically, secularization started with the separation of the Church from the state, with constitutional proclamations in France and the United States, not of a churchless society, but of a

churchless state. In the case of France, this proclamation was made at the time of the Revolution to formalize the break with a feudal past. In the United States, the American Revolution needed to distance the state from an official religion (and therefore from all religions), in order to proclaim freedom of religion and accommodate the denominational pluralism of the citizens.

No such political imperatives ever existed in Britain or its dominion of Canada, where a break from feudalism never occurred (although the evolution of capitalism did) and where freedom of religion became politically tolerated and practised, not constitutionally proclaimed. Yet one can argue quite correctly that secularization took place in the 19th and 20th centuries in both Britain and English Canada. The process was the institutional consequence of the break from Roman Catholicism.

The term **institutional secularization** refers to the process by which institutions initiated, staffed, or managed by clerics came under lay control. In the 16th and 17th centuries, when the Protestant churches broke from Roman Catholicism, whole societies were deprived of the organizational structure of the religious orders whose missions were to aid the poor, to tend the sick, and to provide education (to the extent that it had been developed). Thus new institutions had to be organized on a community basis under the aegis of the Protestant churches, with increased lay participation through voluntary associations. For these structural reasons, the process of institutional secularization took place much earlier in Protestant countries than in Catholic countries. By the 19th century, voluntary associations

Canada—One Country, Two Nations Still

were well established in Protestant countries and gradual secularization of institutions was taking place....

[T]he secularization of social institutions in most Catholic countries did not take place until after the middle of the 20th century. In fact, both the number of religious orders and their membership increased dramatically during the 19th and early 20th centuries in Catholic countries; the Church became progressively more involved in social institutions during that period of transition when the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, as Everett C. Hughes once put it, no longer belonged to their kin and did not yet belong to the state.

This brief historical outline sets the stage for the analysis of the secularization of Quebec, which, it must be remembered, was—and still is—a Catholic society.

The Social Institutions

As the Quiet Revolution swept Quebec, the Church had neither the human nor the financial resources necessary to develop the education and health-care institutions required to meet social needs as defined by the new middle classes. These needs were broadly defined indeed: nothing short of universal access to free education up to the university level, and heavy subsidies thereafter; free hospitalization for all citizens; and (later in the 1960s) free medical care. When the state accepted such a mandate, it sealed the fate of the Church in the whole area of social institutions. Such massive and rapid investment of public money required the development of a public bureaucracy to act on behalf of the public will.... Neither the Church as an institution nor the traditional community elites could be the agents of this institutional development. New elites... would swell the ranks of the new middle classes in the ever-growing public bureaucracies....

Once the state decided to modernize and expand the education system by the use of incentives, the secularization of the education sys-

tem was greatly accelerated. This acceleration had nothing to do, as is commonly assumed, with a growing loss of religious belief or decrease in religiosity. Rather, it came from simple economic calculation at the community level. As long as the costs of education were borne locally, through taxes raised from local pockets, it made local economic sense to have clerical teachers, who cost much less than lay teachers because they lived communally and frugally and were low-level consumers. However, once the provincial government bore an overwhelming share of the costs of education, it quickly dawned on local business people (who made up most local school boards) that it made much more sense—if not to the total local community, at least to its merchants—to seek lay people with the highest possible qualifications. Not only were their salaries highly subsidized; they were big spenders with an assured income. In contrast to nuns and priests, lay teachers paid taxes and got married. Everyone—the hairdresser, the car dealer, the real-estate agent, and the insurance salesperson—could expect some share of the action. When principle and self-interest so neatly coincided, no wonder institutional change was both swift and harmonious.

While communities were securing immediate economic advantage, however, their control over local institutions was being sapped. Whether community elites were aware of this erosion or felt it was fair tradeoff, the fact is that bureaucratic centralization soon eclipsed the importance of community....

The Exodus of Clergy

During the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Quebec, like English Canada, the United States, and some European countries, quite suddenly saw a new phenomenon: priests and nuns left their vocations in droves. Part of the process may be explained by ideological changes within the Catholic Church and part

by the fact that the Vatican increasingly facilitated the release of individuals from their clerical vows. Equally facilitating these “defections” in Quebec was the fact that, contrary to the situation before the Quiet Revolution, priests or nuns who left orders could now quite easily find a place for themselves within the social structure. No longer were former clerics—especially priests—viewed as having committed spiritual treason by leaving the sacred calling; no longer could a defector cope only by either leaving the society or concealing his or her previous occupation. Suddenly, with the change in the social order, ex-priests could (and did) enter the growing ranks of the public and semi-public bureaucracies. The change was so thorough and so pervasive that priests who taught religion at the Université de Montréal, which holds a pontifical charter, were able, because of tenure, to keep their positions after quitting the ranks of the clergy and of celibates. Such a situation would have been inconceivable less than a decade earlier....

More or less simultaneously with the Quiet Revolution, decisions to enter the religious life suddenly shrank to a trickle, and defections increased dramatically.... The shrinking role of the Church in the newly emerged social order was certainly a key factor. The Church, which had previously offered both full career patterns and social esteem, could now promise neither. One can also say that the Catholic hierarchy unwittingly helped to curtail the potential of clerical careers....

The Decrease in Religious Practice

“Tradition,” Everett Hughes once pointed out in conversation, “is sacred only so long as it is useful.” If tradition involves a mix of the sacred and the utilitarian, it follows that the first people to question its sacred character will be those for whom tradition is no longer useful. And indeed in mid-20th century Quebec,

Canada—One Country, Two Nations Still

it was the intelligentsia and the new middle classes—whose careers and interests were no longer served by the traditional culture, institutions, or leadership—who first challenged the legitimacy of all three.

For traditional Quebec society, including the elites, visible religious practices were interwoven with almost every part of life. Many of these folkways all but disappeared over a very short time. For example, people had been accustomed to locate themselves by referring to the parish in which they resided; this custom rapidly disappeared as the majority of people no longer knew the names or the general locations of parish churches.

It would not be misleading to say that most of the population drifted into secularization through inattention. For the majority, estrangement from religious practice developed as a result of the Church's growing irrelevance in meeting their everyday needs. Schools were no longer linked to the Catholic parish; teachers were more apt to be lay than clerical; hospitals and clinics were professionally administered by specialists who lived far from where they worked, and neither knew nor cared to know about their clients in other than a professional capacity. The secularization of charity in the professionally operated agencies of the state left the Church not only with a shrinking role but also with half-empty buildings whose material upkeep became increasingly dependent on the continuing popularity of bingo.

The fall-off was evident both in the important decisions of life and in the minutiae of daily living....

The Canadian Question

By the late 1970s, a modern and secular social order had indeed

emerged in Quebec society. Quebec had put its internal house in order, in line with other developed societies. In spite of this—maybe because of this—Quebec remained politically restive. It was readying itself to challenge the legitimacy of another sacred institution: the Canadian state. The internal issue of Church and society having been resolved, the external issue of state and society rose to the top of the political agenda. For Quebec society that was *the* Canadian question....

Commonly agreed-on history presupposes a common celebration of either a glorious past or a common victory over an undesirable past. France can claim both; Britain can claim the first; the United States, the latter; and Canada neither. The cruelty of this observation is mitigated by the fact that political consensus can also be built on shared visions of the future. Such visions, however, must be based on the correction of history, not its denial. "Unhyphenated Canadianism" is a mirage based on the confusion of individual biography with group history. All immigrants have a biographical break with a past in which the country of origin somehow, to some degree, became undesirable—often because of denied opportunity or political persecution; the country of adoption, by the mere fact of receiving the immigrants, symbolizes a land of opportunity or a refuge from oppression, both of which are good reasons for thanksgiving. In contrast, the French and the English in Canada are burdened with historical continuity. In both cases, the breaking with the biographical past creates not a new citizen but a marginal one. And while marginal people may invest myths and create new visions, a new political order without group consent re-

mains beyond reach....

The last person to speak candidly about the social and political reality of Canada in unambiguous, well-established English words was Lord Durham, in his description of "two nations warring in the bosom of the same state." He recommended the subjugation of the French to the vigorous rule of the British, advice that was heeded but that did not succeed. Before Confederation, following this advice required thwarting democratic principles. With Confederation, those principles ensured political domination of the French nation.

Ever after, the word nation to describe the French fact in Canada was banned from the political vocabulary of Canadian academics and politicians. To make credible this semantic confusion, it became customary to refer not to the Canadian *state* but to the Canadian *nation*—creating unity not politically but semantically.

Such obfuscation obviously requires education. Denying reality rather than assuming it is characteristic of Canadian politicians, not of ordinary Canadian citizens. On leaving or entering Quebec, Québécois and non-Québécois alike quickly perceive the reality of cultural and social differences. Some people are dumbstruck by the differences. Others are paranoid about them. Both types of reaction testify to the reality of social and cultural boundaries. The fact that this dual reality cannot find a political expression in the Canadian political system constitutes its basic vulnerability....

**Hubert Guindon is professor of sociology emeritus,
Concordia University, Montréal.**

**Originally published in Michael Rosenberg, et al. (eds.) *An Introduction to Sociology* (Toronto: Methuen, 1987, 2nd edition). ©1995, Hubert Guindon.
Excerpted with permission.**