Quebec, Canada & the Conservative Movement

The Two Solitudes Persist
Quebec, Canada and conservatism

Conservatives in English Canada have long been frustrated by Quebec. Politically speaking, the province has always seemed to be on a different track than the rest of the country. In the 2011 federal election, just as Canadians finally warmed to the Harper Tories, Quebec went 180 degrees in the opposite direction, embracing – for the first time – the socialist NDP. In this issue of c2c, we examine why this happened and report on the state of conservatism in Quebec.

Conventional wisdom is that the NDP’s meteoric rise may be an isolated incident – one election is a fluke, not a trend. Authors Bradley Doucet and Jasmin Guénette, Brendan Steven and Vincent Geloso examine the impacts of the NDP’s rise and what it means for conservatism in the province and Quebec’s relationship with the rest of Canada. Despite its reputation as the least conservative of the provinces, Quebecers have traditionally been as supportive as or more supportive than other Canadians when it comes to two conservative positions: an increased role for the private sector in healthcare, and free trade. Did the May 11 election results change this? Does the rejection by Quebec of the Harper Tories mean the country is more divided than ever? We examine those questions and more.

On the provincial political scene, there are other troubling signs on the horizon. As Paul Beaudry writes, the right-of-centre ADQ faces a new competitor as the third option at the provincial level. The Coalition pour l’avenir du Québec (CAQ) is being portrayed as being on the right, yet is at best centrist. The CAQ, headed by former PQ cabinet minister François Legault, advocates an even more activist government, including protectionist economic policies and stricter enforcement of language laws. Pressure is mounting on the ADQ to merge with or even fold into this new entity.

We also talk to Joanne Marcotte, a leading voice for free markets and individual liberty in Quebec, about her new book and the state of conservatism in the province.

Enjoy the issue.

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This past autumn in Quebec has been fraught with uncertainty for the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), the only provincial party to identify explicitly as right-of-centre. The ADQ’s existence is now threatened by the newly created Coalition pour l’avenir du Québec (CAQ) party, the brainchild of former Parti Québécois (PQ) minister François Legault and the successful entrepreneur Charles Sirois. Since the rise of the CAQ, the ADQ has been in talks with a CAQ about a potential merger. Paul Beaudry argues such a merger is wrongheaded. CAQ policies would not bring about the fiscal discipline and reforms needed to improve Quebec’s public finances. Instead, such policies would likely render a CAQ government’s performance largely indistinguishable from that of its predecessors. The ADQ remains the best political vehicle to promote market-friendly changes to the Quebec political landscape. As such, it ought to turn down the CAQ’s advances, and remain an independent political party.

By Paul Beaudry

This past autumn in Québec has been fraught with uncertainty for the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), the only provincial party to identify explicitly as right-of-centre. The newly created Coalition pour l’avenir du Québec (CAQ), the brainchild of former Parti Québécois (PQ) minister François Legault and the successful entrepreneur Charles Sirois, threatens the ADQ’s existence. The CAQ, initially created as a grassroots movement in early 2011, has quickly gathered popularity with the Québec electorate, which has grown tired of a Québec Liberal Party plagued with corruption scandals and a PQ under the shaky and contested leadership of Pauline Marois. In this political environment, the CAQ is a welcome alternative. Among the CAQ’s better known objectives are preventing the supposed exodus of corporate headquarters from Québec so that it does not become a “branch plant” economy. (Charles Sirois has long crusaded in favour of government intervention to prevent foreign takeovers of Canadian corporations.)

In recent months, a succession of Québec polls has indicated the CAQ would form the government in the event of a provincial election. This even though the CAQ’s official existence as a political party did not occur until mid-November.

Although the CAQ was labeled “right-of-centre” by the Québec media, Legault refuses to accept that label. Rather, he identifies himself and the CAQ as proponents of the “efficient left” (or “gauche efficace”).
Although the CAQ was labeled “right-of-centre” by the Québec media, Legault refuses to accept that label. Rather, he identifies himself and the CAQ as proponents of the “efficient left” (or “gauche efficace”). He does not wish to stray from the main tenets of the so-called “Québec model”, which is characterized by generous social programs, a public healthcare system and an interventionist role for the state in the economy. Despite these positions, many of the members and even the leadership of the ADQ think that the survival of their party is conditional upon a merger with the CAQ. On November 7, 2011, ADQ leader Gérard Deltell, in a letter to his party members, announced that discussions with the CAQ would start in the coming weeks and that any decision regarding a potential merger would need the approval of ADQ members.

The conservative movement in Québec has historically been an alliance of nationalists and economic conservatives. As such, its success has relied on a variation of the fusionism promoted by U.S. political thinker Frank Meyer: the idea that holders of a wide array of conservative beliefs should work together to promote a more limited and decentralized government. The political success of the ADQ in the last several years is a result of this Québec version of fusionism. Founded in 1994 as a nationalist party by former Québec Liberals disappointed with then-premier Robert Bourassa’s embrace of the Charlottetown Accord, the original ADQ platform focused on the adoption and implementation of the Allaire Report, which advocated for a more decentralized federation and the transfer of powers from the federal government to Québec.

The ADQ remained in the proverbial political wilderness – with only one elected member (its leader, Mario Dumont) at the National Assembly – until 2002, when a series of wins in by-elections brought its caucus to five members. As a result, the ADQ was no longer recognized as a voice for nationalist Quebeckers only, but also as the voice of small-c conservatism in provincial politics. The advocacy of a flat tax and school vouchers at one time buttressed the ADQ’s economically conservative credentials. In the 2007 Québec provincial election, the ADQ reached the peak of its electoral success when it became the Official Opposition to the governing Liberal minority government. That success was short-lived, however, as the ADQ caucus dwindled to three members from 43 after a brutal electoral performance in 2008.

The arrival of the CAQ constitutes a real threat to the ADQ’s fusionist alliance and to Québec conservatives in general. Jean Allaire, one of the ADQ’s founders, has publicly indicated his support for a merger. The CAQ seems to appeal to those in the ADQ who may be considered moderates, nationalists and those who tend to simply align themselves with third-party options. However, the economic conservatives and libertarians amongst the party’s base have not been enthusiastic about the prospects of a merger. One of the most outspoken opponents of a CAQ-ADQ merger is well-known Québec businessman Adrien Pouliot, a libertarian-leaning member of the ADQ’s political commission; he has not shied away from heavily criticizing many of the CAQ’s interventionist policies.

The CAQ’s unrelenting protectionism

Beyond ideological criticisms, the CAQ’s policies unreasonably favour protectionism when there is no evidence of any actual improvement in the Québec economy. One of its most potentially damaging proposed policies is using the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, Québec’s pension fund manager, as an economic development tool. Deploring the dwindling number of corporate head offices in Montreal, the CAQ proposes that the Caisse significantly increase its investments in Québec companies and review its mission in order to reflect this new policy orientation.

In addition, the CAQ proposes to set up a $5-billion fund partly financed by the Caisse so that the Caisse can take minority stakes in natural resources companies. Those who can attest to the Caisse’s poor financial performance, which was based on investing in Québec corporations over the last few decades, can only be frightened by such a proposal. The natural resources sector is subject to significant price volatility, and politicizing the Caisse’s investment decisions in
this sector could have a catastrophic impact on its investments.

Legault, in particular, should know better and understand the folly of such interventionism: One of the Caisse's major failed investments was its 1983 acquisition of Quebecair, a struggling Quebec-based airline. CP Air bought the unprofitable airline in 1986. It was sold at a loss and, at the time, Legault was its director of marketing.

The CAQ also proposes agricultural policies directed at ensuring Quebec ownership of Quebec farmland. The mechanism favoured by the CAQ is the creation of Quebec-owned regional co-ops that would buy Quebec farmland. They would be funded by securitization and then the co-ops would lease the land to Quebec farmers. The CAQ position paper on the economy stresses that it is “invaluable that ownership of our farmland remains local.” No clear explanation is provided as to why this is preferable to allowing foreigners to invest in the Quebec agricultural economy (after all, the farmland cannot be moved overseas), but it is understood that this is an extension of the Maître chez nous ("masters of our own house") ideology inherited from the Quiet Revolution.

**The CAQ’s efficient manager fallacy**

The CAQ also suffers from a belief in the “efficient manager” fallacy. This is the notion that bureaucratic and technocratic prowess alone can solve most shortcomings in the public sector in the same way that new management in a corporation can contribute to the improvement of its financial situation. The CAQ policies are deeply enmeshed in this fallacy. Both co-founders of the party have had long careers in business and this may explain their management-focused approach, but the public sector is not like the private sector in this regard.

The public sector, unlike the private sector, does not have profits and losses – it merely seizes funds from the public. No market mechanism dictates whether government should produce more or less of an item, how it should produce this item and where it should produce it. Thus, government failures, unlike business failures, can never be solely attributed to the shortcomings of individuals and then solved by turning over the reins of government to competent managers. As Ludwig von Mises wrote in *Bureaucracy*:

> It is vain to advocate a bureaucratic reform through the appointment of businessmen as heads of various departments. The quality of being an entrepreneur is not inherent in the personality of the entrepreneur; it is inherent in the position which he occupies in the framework of market society.

An example of this faulty thinking is the CAQ’s policy proposals on health care, which do not provide for any meaningful private sector role in public health-insurance services. This is remarkable given that the party has been identified at being on the centre-right of the political spectrum. Instead, the CAQ’s policies suggest a command and control approach based on improving the “efficiency” of the system; that is, better management of the current health-care system. However, the Quebec government has been trying since the inception of universal health care to centrally administer the provision of health care. Despite its efforts, the long wait lists, the shortage of doctors and the misallocation of resources continue. Given this history of unsuccessful government management, it is hard to see how the CAQ’s premise of more system tinkering will solve these massive government failures.

The efficient manager approach is arguably a major reason for the CAQ’s success in recent polls. The co-founders of the CAQ have excellent public reputations in Quebec as accomplished businessmen and in Legault’s case, extensive political experience. Legault and Sirois hold themselves out as superior managers who are able to improve the province’s finances in the same way that they were able to achieve success in the private sector. However, even if these two men could accomplish all that they claim, a political strategy that rests solely on the personal involvement of certain individuals may have limited longevity.

**Prescriptions for the ADQ**

With the presumption of being a political party with a decent chance of winning the next provincial election and with the perception of being a right-of-
centre party, the CAQ will likely attract members from
the ADQ. Most members of its caucus have already
shown some enthusiasm for a potential merger with
the CAQ; they might even decide to leave the party if
ADQ members vote against a potential merger with
the CAQ.

That said, ADQ members who are preoccupied with
the ever-increasing size of the Québec government, its
out-of-control public debt and its unsustainable social
programs ought to take a hard look at what the CAQ
proposes. Its positions would not even incrementally
improve Québec’s position from a limited government
point of view. The reality is that massive government
intervention in Québec has been tried for half a
century and it is the reason Québec has high taxes, high
debt, sub-standard public services, broken bridges
and other infrastructure, as well as the inevitable
corruption that too much political involvement in the
economy brings.

Many CAQ policies would not deliver the fiscal
discipline and reforms needed to improve Québec’s
public finances. Instead, such policies would likely
render a CAQ government’s performance largely
undistinguishable from that of its predecessors. The
ADQ remains the best political vehicle for promoting
market-friendly changes to the Québec political
landscape. As such, it ought to turn down the CAQ’s
advances and remain an independent political party.

The author wishes to thank Stephanie Chipeur for her
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The Future
of Free Trade in Québec

Free trade has divided Canadians since the days of Confederation, with one side worrying about fall-
ing under the influence of our large southern neighbour and the other side trumpeting the benefits
for economic growth. In Quebec, even the separatist Parti Québécois has tended to support free trade,
if only because it makes the province less dependent on the rest of Canada. That might change, how-
ever, now that the federal NDP has made such significant inroads in la belle province.

By Bradley Doucet and Jasmin Guénette

When the Mulroney government ran for re-
election in 1988, the main focus of the
campaign was the signing of the free trade
agreement between Canada and the United States. It
was an issue that sharply divided the country. In the
red corner the provinces and political parties
that were against free trade, and in the blue corner,
those who were in favour.

Those in the red corner believed in protectionism
because they were afraid of the economic and cultural power of the United States. During the federal campaign’s English debate on October 25, 1988, Liberal leader John Turner worried aloud about “the north-south influence of the United States,” and he was convinced free trade would reduce Canada “to a colony of the United States.” Sir John A. Macdonald had expounded similar annexationist fears in 1891 in his contest against free trade advocate Wilfrid Laurier.

In the blue corner with Brian Mulroney were two provinces: Québec and Alberta. Like Laurier before them, the blue corner saw the free trade agreement as it was and is: an incredible opportunity for business and an engine for economic growth.

Québec and Alberta had different reasons for being in the blue corner. As the Montreal Economic Institute explained in a recent research paper titled "A Plea for a Quebec-Alberta Dialogue": “Albertans ... have long been in favour of free trade with the United States, particularly in reaction to Canadian protectionism that was perceived as having favoured the country’s Eastern provinces since the end of the 19th century.” (p. 14)

Politicians in Québec stood for free trade for a variety of reasons. The provincial Liberal Party, the perceived right-wing political formation with a business agenda, favoured free trade mainly for economic reasons. However, the Parti Québécois (PQ), the separatist party, also favoured free trade, one reason being “a free trade agreement with the United States had the advantage of making the Québec economy less dependent on the rest of Canada, therefore facilitating the road to political independence.” (p. 14) So, in Québec, most political leaders understand the benefits of free trade, and whether they want economic growth or to move on politically, the U.S. market (and now the European market) was and is seen in a positive light.

This might change in the coming years, however, if the NDP increases its political influence in la belle province. As we wrote in the Washington Examiner a few months ago, the last federal election was a political tsunami, especially in Québec. Before the last federal election, the NDP had only one seat in Québec, held by Thomas Mulcair. When the winner was declared on the evening of May 2, the NDP had catapulted to 59 seats in the province (and 102 across the country). If this election was just an aberration, the NDP will not
have gained much more influence than it had before the last election. But if the NDP remains a strong political voice in the province, Québec might move to the red corner of the free trade debate before long.

The NDP promotes more of a radical left political agenda than many other left-leaning parties we have seen in this province, at either the federal or the provincial level. In many provinces, the NDP has formed the provincial government or the Official Opposition and it has fared relatively well in federal elections, too. In Québec, this was never the case before May 2, 2011. Not only was this a first in Canadian history, but now the majority of NDP MPs are from la belle province.

One possibility is that the policies that will be promoted by the Québec delegation of the NDP will follow in the footsteps of other well-known left-leaning political figures who, like former Québec premier and PQ leader Bernard Landry, believe in government intervention yet also understand the benefits of free trade. The overall anti-free trade position of the NDP might soften as a result.

But there are cultural and political reasons to doubt that this will be the case. Culturally speaking, the NDP has no deep roots in Québec, and the intellectual influence behind many of the decisions backed by Québec NDP MPs will therefore not come from years of NDP presence in the province but rather from the NDP’s political tradition that was set outside of Québec. And outside of Québec, the left is against free trade. As International Trade Minister Ed Fast argued in a speech to a Montreal business audience this past September, the NDP usually flies under the banner of “fair trade,” but the result is always NDP opposition to Canada’s trade agreements, as when the party filibustered the ratification of the Canada-Columbia Free Trade Agreement in 2009.

Politically speaking, given the sheer number of NDP MPs elected in May, it is impossible for their decision-makers not to listen to Québec’s demands. And Québec does want free trade. An April 2009 Harris-Decima poll found that 73 per cent of Quebeckers thought Canada “should pursue the establishment of more free trade agreements,” tied for first place among the provinces and slightly ahead of the Canadian average of 70 per cent. (Ontario brought up the rear at 65 per cent.)

But what will this political influence amount to when the vast majority of the Québec delegation is made up of people with little to no political experience? Of course, there are a few in the bunch with more experience, such as Thomas Mulcair. But will Mulcair be promoting free trade with the European Union now that he is seeking the NDP’s national leadership? We will see in the coming weeks, but NDP supporters in the rest of the country would not look kindly on the party’s Québec wing advocating freer trade and less regulation of economic activities.

Supporters of the federal Bloc Québécois were also very likely to support free trade. As the Harris-Decima poll mentioned above showed, they supported free trade as much as Conservative supporters (76%), and far more than NDP supporters (64%).

Given the NDP’s historic surge in May, however, the province’s political landscape has changed. With 59 seats, the NDP has five more Québec seats than the Bloc ever had and 10 more than the Bloc had in the last parliament. If the NDP influences the left in Québec more than vice versa – through efforts to oppose a trade deal with the EU, for example – the province’s tradition of solid support for free trade, which dates back to Quebecer Wilfrid Laurier, might wind up being outdated.

The opinions expressed in this text do not represent those of anybody except the authors themselves.

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1. Tell us what your film L’Illusion Tranquille was about? What inspired you to make it?

The Quiet Illusion challenges many of Quebec’s sacred cows: the “sacrosanct” Quebec model, powerful trade unions, costly and inefficient universal social programs, state monopolies, etc. The main conclusion of the film is as follows: “We knew that the Quebec model was costly and inefficient. Now we know that, contrary to the magical thinking propaganda, it does not deliver in terms of social justice.” Worst of all, the Quebec model is based on intergenerational injustice. It is this injustice that inspired me to make this film.

2. When you made the film, there was opposition from within Quebec to what you said in it. Why do you think that is and what did that say about Quebec society at the time?

Quebec’s elites (government, media, left-wingers) pride themselves on being “different” from the rest of Canada and from the “neoliberal” United States. Their identity is based on this difference. They assume that Quebec is a more just society. The film demonstrates that it is far from being the case. Our social programs help the rich much more than the poor and are paid for either by the ROC or by future generations. (See, for example, Barbara Kay’s article: Click here or Henry Aubin’s article: Click here and Graeme Hamilton’s article: Click here)

3. Looking back, how would you assess the impact of your film on Quebec society?

I would like to believe that the more immediate impact was a boost for Mario Dumont’s ADQ in 2007 where his party became the Official Opposition Party in Quebec in Charest’s 2008 minority government. I guess also that I was one of the first voices that expressed the Quebecers had had enough of the sovereigntist-federalist debate. It was urgent to question our socio-economic model and resolve problems that were of our own making. In the following couple of weeks of the film’s launch, I received 3,000 emails of Quebecers mainly saying the same thing. “I am not alone”, “You expressed exactly what I think since many, many years”, “Thank you, thank you, thank you”. Whereas the film was supposed to be in a theatre for two weeks, it was there six weeks before Christmas and it came back six weeks after Christmas. People applauded at the end of viewings. Even Radio-Canada had us on every talk show they had.

4. What has changed since? Do you think Quebec still has many of the problems you identified in your film?

Not much, if anything [has changed]. We are still “tweaking” the system whereas the main question is still being eluded: “What is the role of government?” Unions are still co-governing the province, government intervention is still at its highest (especially since the...
I think that Quebecers are more and more aware that the Quebec model is outdated. Unfortunately, not only Quebecers are not ready to pay the price of reforms, but also there is no political leadership courageous enough to convince people that the time has come to do something about it.

5. As a director, what role do you see films and documentaries playing in the smaller government movement?

I think that the film played a major role in not only networking people that share the same views but in educating the mainstream media that such ideas exist. Think tanks do a great job but they tend to talk among themselves. Studies, books and research articles have their limits. Quite frankly, very few people read them and fewer people relay them to the greater public. What is needed the most, I think, are people that can relay these ideas and network people. That is the reason why I co-founded the Réseau Liberté Québec in 2010, a sort of Quebec Manning Centre for Building Democracy, if you will. Radio, film and blogs, as I see it, are the most efficient ways to communicate “small government” ideas.

By the way, next November 8th, exactly 5 years after launching L’Illusion tranquille, I launched my new book Pour en finir avec le governemaman. I hope, as the film did, it will serve as another visit card so that I may continue sharing small-c fiscally responsible conservatism in Quebec.

6. Many saw the Mario Dumont’s ADQ as the hope for smaller government in Quebec. What, in your view, happened that led to the failure of that party?

Mario Dumont abandoned his base when his party was the Official Opposition. The following election, 700,000 people that had voted for his party in 2007 did not vote in 2008. That is the main reason.

7. The ADQ generally avoided moral issues, but do you see any role for social conservatism within Quebec?

If “social conservatism” means revisiting abortion rights, the death penalty or reintroducing religion in state affairs, the answer is a resounding NO. Having said that, Quebecers are really worried about the impact of multiculturalism. Many of us are worried that our Western values are being shaken by the religious agendas of some of the newcomers. Equality between men and women, free press and opinion, and the separation of church and state must and should be defended at all costs.

8. What does the NDP victory say about Quebec and the prominence of conservatism?

Absolutely nothing. I am convinced that the NDP vote was simply a way to get rid of the Bloc Quebecois. I also think that Quebecers will get rid of the Parti Quebecois in the next provincial election and that the Liberal Party will be reduced to its few seats in Montreal. Sometimes, to get somewhere, you cannot do it in one step. This year’s federal election was, I hope, a first step in abandoning the federalist-sovereignist discussion and opting for a left-right debate in Quebec.

9. What are your thoughts on François Legault’s new political movement?

Personally, I think that the NDP sweep will be followed by a Legault sweep in Quebec. I think that Quebecers will repeat what happened last May 2nd. They will want to get rid of the Parti Quebecois AND serve Jean Charest a lesson. By the way, a recent survey in La Presse says exactly that. If elections were held today, Legault’s group allied with the ADQ would give them 48%. Legault alone gets 39%! (http://www.cyberpresse.ca/actualites/201111/22/01-4459832-sondage-les-chefs-en-chute-libre.php)

In both of these instances, I think that people did not and will not care what parties and people stand for. All they want is a change of government. They still do not really want a change in politics since a real change would require a great deal of lucidity and sacrifice.

Having said that, I believe that François Legault is
a strong supporter of the socialist Quebec model. He is a "Quebec Inc." sort of guy and revels in social and economic government intervention. Legault is a pure product of the Quebec model. Coming from the PQ, he is an interventionist in social and economic matters. Nowhere in his platform does he attack public spending. When he cuts one place, he redistributes somewhere else.

In economic matters, he is a firm believer of using the Caisse de dépôt et de placement du Québec as a nationalist tool: to invest in Quebec companies, that sort of thing. Also, there will be no cuts in company subsidies (when Quebec subsidies companies at a level equivalent to the rest of all the Canadian provinces!).

Let us hope that after a first step in eliminating the Parti Québécois, a real small-c party in Quebec will rise and find its supporters.

10. Is there any hope for Harper in Quebec?

I think so but there needs to be courageous and credible people to promote small-c conservative ideas. And Quebecers also need to be reassured that social conservatism is not on the PC’s agenda.

What everybody respects, though, is a leader that does what he says and in this case, Harper delivers.

In the next four years, the Réseau Liberté-Québec could play a role in this sense. Networking small-c conservatives from the ground up is one of our goals. In both of our events (October 2010 and April 2011), more than 450 people came. Speakers like Ezra Levant and Danielle Smith were greatly appreciated. Maybe Mr. Harper would find it interesting to come at our next event in April 2011 in Lévis, who knows?

11. Do you think the current economic crisis enveloping Europe and the United States will help convince Quebecers that their fiscal model is unsustainable?

No. If change is to come, the crisis needs to be much closer and it needs to affect their lives. Moreover, I do think that Quebecers are much more aware that their fiscal model is unsustainable. The thing is, they, as the rest of Westerners, are not ready to pay the price of reforms.

12. What, in your view, will it take to wake Quebecers up and convince them that their model is heading for catastrophe?

As I said, I think that Quebecers are and more aware that the Quebec model is outdated. Unfortunately, not only Quebecers are not ready to pay the price of reforms, but also there is no political leadership courageous enough to convince people that the time has come to do something about it. In the end, reforms will have to be made and the more we wait, the more severe they will be.

Right now, as we see everywhere in Western and indebted countries, people blame everybody but themselves: banks, capitalism, neoliberalism, individualism, governments, etc. Curiously it is the same people that have asked governments to intervene time and time again in social and economic matters.

13. What are your future plans?

On November 8th, exactly 5 years after my documentary, I launched the sequel of The Quiet Illusion in the form on an essay. The 200-page book goes further in denouncing the Quebec model but explores new aspects of it. A greater emphasis is put on the cultural differences between Quebecers and the ROC or more precisely the English speaking Canadians. The conclusion is that we need more than public policy change or even change in politicians. We need change in our cultural values. Example: encourage entrepreneurship, do away with union values, etc. I also plan to continue to coordinate things at the Réseau Liberté-Québec.
Before the last federal election, no seasoned political observer would have dared to bet on a reversal of fortunes for the New Democratic Party in Quebec. From 1931 to 2008, the NDP and its ancestor – the Commonwealth Cooperative Federation – failed to grab any seats in general elections. The NDP carrying 59 seats of Quebec’s 75 seats in the House of Commons on May 2nd is hence one of the most mind-boggling political events in recent history.

In the aftermath of the election, the same seasoned political observers concentrated only on the sheer impressiveness of the “orange crush”. They have all failed to take notice of something that is much more subtle: the NDP does not fit ideologically with what Quebeckers believe.

The NDP is not supportive of privatization – regardless of the form it takes such as delegating management to the private sector or the outright sale of government assets. In this regard, it opposes the involvement of the private sector in the delivery of healthcare in order to increase the supply of medical services. The NDP has also argued that balancing the budget was not necessarily a priority and that such a policy objective ought to be achieved with tax increases. It also favours stronger intervention on the part of Ottawa in managing the economy and larger welfare programs. In short, its political manifesto is unambiguously social-democratic in nature.

This is why the NDP’s surge is so confusing. In the last five provincial elections in Quebec, right wing parties have always collected above 55% of votes. This rightward slouch can also be observed in polls where there are always more than 55% of individuals who admit to desiring more private sector involvement in healthcare delivery. Other polls show similar tendencies. For example, in a poll commissioned by the left-leaning Le Devoir, 46% of Quebeckers preferred a cut in government spending accompanied by a cut in taxes compared to only 9% desiring increased spending and 32% advocating the status quo. In a more recent poll, 51% of Quebeckers wanted the government to cut spending by an amount large enough to balance the budget in one year (the deficit stands at nearly $4 billion). Furthermore, the NDP is no friend of Quebec nationalism: it supported the despised Clarity Act, it has historically supported a strong central government in Ottawa and it was Elijah Harper, a NDP MLA in Manitoba, who delivered the fatal blow to the Meech Lake Accord.

How can the NDP win 59 seats with such views? Some have claimed that the 50-year long debate between federalists and separatists has confused Quebeckers so much that they have a hard time distinguishing left from right. This explanation conveys an ounce of truth since it has caused left and right to ally on occasion to promote their views with regards to the “national question”. However, this explanation is not sufficient. A stronger explanation stems from the
political heritage of the Quiet Revolution.

Everyone born after the 1950s in Quebec has been taught to believe that “modern Quebec” started in 1960 with the defeat of the conservative Union Nationale, which had governed the province virtually undisputed since 1944. From 1960 onwards, Quebec became a rich and modern society and everything we have today is the heritage of the “Quiet Revolution”; everything before that moment was dubbed the “Great Darkness”.

Such a trick of political rhetoric does not only explain why provincial governments have failed to push forward serious economic reforms, but also explains the rise of the NDP.

It must be understood that the increasingly interventionist government of Quebec that rose out of the sixties opened the door to special interest groups. These groups demanded measures to protect them from competition and redistribute wealth towards them regardless of how viable the programs were. The costs of these programs were spread over a large population of taxpayers and consumers. So large was this population that the cost for a single taxpayer or consumer did not make it worthwhile to fight these policies. However, so large were the benefits to these interest groups that they did everything to make sure they obtained and kept what they lobbied the government for. The more nights they spent in bed with government, the more they adversely affected economic performance. One only needs to look at the $240 billion worth of public debt, the low rates of productivity growth, the high rates of unemployment, and the high spending levels (all relative to the rest of Canada) as witness to how adversely they affected the Quebec economy.

These interest groups have blocked every attempt at reform, regardless of how the general population felt instinctively and as we have seen above, Quebeckers are instinctively close to conservative views. Those who have a vested interest will be the first to accuse anyone who questions how “dark” was the “Great Darkness” to desire a return to the heydays of obscurantism. They will also accuse anyone who questions the policies currently in place of having an agenda to bring the province back to the “Great Darkness”. Accusations made regardless of the rising body of literature detailing the so-called Great Darkness as a period of rapid economic and social modernization (I have myself made this case in an earlier article in this journal). [http://c2cjournal.ca/2010/10/the-slandering-of-duplessis/]

However, due to their sheer size, these interest groups will hammer away their message until we see no other possible version of reality. No politician in his right mind dares to confront such interest groups who have the will and power to defeat him in order to support a majority of misinformed voters. After all, everyone who lacks a vested interest in the bloated, interventionist and morbidly obese Quebec government also lacks interest to investigate how harmful the policies in place are.

However, voters can see reality; they can feel it in their wallets and bank accounts. They may not understand how X and Y policy hurts them by prohibiting competition or by granting corporate welfare to one industry or another, but they do see that something is wrong when they are asked to pay more taxes while their incomes do not grow as fast as elsewhere in Canada. They do see the rising debt levels and they do see how long they have to wait in hospital waiting rooms with the sign “Emergencies” above their heads.

How can they not grow increasingly frustrated without desiring changes? They will vote for change regardless of the form it takes. How then can we explain Quebeckers being infatuated with the ADQ in 2002 only to elect the Liberals rather than the PQ and then only to return to the PQ in between the elections and then throwing them away in favour of the ADQ and then returning to the liberals and finally opting for a whole new party under François Legault. Dizzying? Such electoral volatility is indeed quite dizzying, but it does indicate ideological confusion. How then can we explain that since 2003, Quebeckers have preferred the federal liberals, then the Bloc Québécois, followed by the Conservatives, then a return to the Bloc Québécois
and finally the NDP?

As a “founding moment” in Quebec history, the Quiet Revolution cannot be questioned and because it cannot be questioned, everything that is linked with it cannot be questioned either, let alone be reformed or thrown away. Corporate interest groups and unions understand this and they know how potent a political weapon it can be. Hence, they wield it often with frightening efficiency.

Voters are therefore confused between the reality they observe and the politically correct discourse. They will vote for anything that gives them the glimmer of a hope of changing things, even if the change they opt for is completely at odds with their beliefs – like the NDP.

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The TWO SOLITUDES make a comeback

Canadian nationhood is an unhappy marriage of two historic solitudes: English and French Canada. In the last federal election, the Conservative government received a majority mandate with 161 seats in English Canada. The NDP were propelled to official opposition on the back of 59 seats from Quebec. The early days of our new parliament have been dominated by issues sharply divided on English-French lines. These issues, pitting Quebec against the rest of Canada, will undoubtedly continue to emerge. Will our unhappy marriage only get worse under the political conditions afforded by the last federal election?”

By Brendan Steven

In 2007, Scott Gardiner published a groundbreaking work of political fiction called King John of Canada. It is easily one of the most thought-provoking novels in Canadian fiction. It reminds readers that Canada is formed from a workable, if unhappy relationship between English and French Canada. It is a relationship that always veers toward conflict and sits on the edge of disaster. If Canada’s new parliament continues on its current course, disaster might not be an unlikely scenario.

The novel supposes that a new referendum on Quebec sovereignty takes place. The country anticipates that Quebec will finally secede. In a moment of clarity, King John offers a revolutionary concept:

On the same day Quebec held its referendum, proposed the King, the Rest of Canada ought to organize a referendum of its own – advancing the self-same question ... [I]t seemed only reasonable that the Rest of Canada should be consulted about its wishes with respect to Quebec.

So they hold a referendum. Both English Canada and Quebec vote to separate, and Canada splits in two. It is a happy divorce.
Gardiner may be cynical about the nature of the two solitudes today, but is his cynicism justified?

Gardiner is right to point out that Canada’s founding peoples are in an unhappy marriage. No one is signing divorce papers but that does not mean the couple is taking long walks on the beach. English and French Canada face a gulf between them that each is willing to let simmer and stew.

No further evidence is needed than to look at the recent results of the federal election. On the backs of 59 parliamentary seats from Quebec, the NDP rocketed into Official Opposition. Meanwhile, the Conservatives are perched in the majority with 145 seats from English Canada. A few Conservative ridings remain in Quebec, and there are NDP parliamentarians who come from English Canada, but each party’s success came from one-half of the two solitudes. English Canada handed Harper his majority, and Quebec handed the NDP their Official Opposition status.

English Canada picked one direction, Quebec another. The sharpness of this divide may be quiet now, but that will not last long.

Many of the major issues that have emerged in this Parliament have divided sharply on English and French lines. The NDP briefly fought to require that Supreme Court justices be bilingual. NDP interim leader Nycole Turmel, in a recent statement criticizing Quebec’s shutout from a multi-billion-dollar shipbuilding contract, slammed the Conservatives for “picking winners and losers.”

NDP leadership candidate Thomas Mulcair lambasted the Harper plan to afford new seats to English provinces as an attack against Quebec. Mulcair also introduced a bill that would subject Quebec businesses under federal jurisdiction to similar language requirements as those enforced under Bill 101.

The NDP offer a different type of Quebec advocacy than that spearheaded by the Bloc Québécois. With only 49 members in the House of Commons, the BQ was on the fringe of Parliament, its issues relegated behind the agenda of the Conservatives and their Liberal opposition.

Now, the role of Quebec advocate has shifted from the Bloc Québécois to the NDP. The difference, of course, is that the Quebec advocate is now the government-in-waiting. The English-French divide is at the forefront of the national dialogue.

History gives us another example of a Parliament divided along English-French lines. Canada’s 35th Parliament featured an English Canadian government and a Quebec advocate as the Official Opposition. Then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Opposition Leader Lucien Bouchard spent an egregious amount of time debating the minutiae of national unity. English-French tensions sprung to the fore, a PQ government was elected in Quebec City and the province plunged into its second referendum.

Now, by no means is it 1993. There is little chance the PQ will retake the National Assembly, and there is even less chance of a new referendum. Canadian unity has never benefited from a Parliament divided, English against Quebecer.

It has only been a few months since the first sitting of Canada’s 41st Parliament. These issues, pitting Quebec against the “Rest of Canada,” will undoubtedly continue to emerge.

Will our unhappy marriage only get worse under the political conditions afforded by the last federal election, with English Canada as government and Quebec as Official Opposition?

Maybe someday we will find a happy middle ground, but until that day comes, I can only anticipate that the situation will get worse. If our national dialogue continues to bring out these old quarrels, then tensions will continue to rise. We have not yet signed the divorce papers, but unless we chart a new course, one day we might. ♦

Brendan Steven is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science & Canadian Studies at McGill University. In January 2011, he co-founded the Prince Arthur Herald, Canada’s only national student-run conservative newspaper, and served as the newspaper’s first Editor-in-Chief. He is an active conservative, having worked in communications for Kitchener-Waterloo MP Peter Braid, numerous political campaign teams, and most recently for Ontario Opposition Leader Tim Hudak. He has columned extensively on Canadian politics, including a syndicated column with the National Citizen’s Coalition and other Canadian media outlets.