Notional Nations:

The Myth of Canada as a Multinational Federation

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ABSTRACT

What is the difference between a nation and a country, and how many nations is too many? The notion of a plurality of nations under one roof in Canada is not as clear-cut as it may first appear. In this article, Jack Jedwab highlights some of the problems with the theory that Canada is a multinational federation, providing a variety of interesting figures to support his case. He demonstrates how identity, ethnicity, citizenship and region all have an important role to play.

Several respected thinkers insist that Canada is a multinational federation comprising an English Canadian nation, a Québécois nation and an Aboriginal nation(s). In fact, some have argued that the ongoing denial of this reality by Canada's political elite puts the future of the federation in perpetual peril. Following the logic of advocates of this notion of a multinational federation, if Canada does not refute its national existence it will lose its standing as a country. Still, it is tempting to ask whether the recognition of several nations within Canada is not the greater threat to its existence as a country.

In 2003, the Quebec National Assembly unananimously adopted a resolution which declared that the people of Quebec formed a nation in response to the House of Commons' rejection of a similar motion proposed by members of the sovereignist Bloc Québécois – a federal opposition party. Underlying the idea that Quebec forms a nation is the notion that Canada constitutes a multinational federation; however, parliamentarians simply declaring that Quebec is a nation does not make it so. No Canadian constitutional document recognizes the concept of three nations, despite certain thinkers frequently repeating the idea. Saying that Canada is a multinational federation is staking a claim rather than stating a fact. While its proponents may argue that it is a novel notion, it is equally valid to contend that the idea's time came and went.

Though the affirmation of Quebec nationhood dates back two centuries, it is in the post-Confederation period that initially emerged the much-debated premise that Canada is the creation of two founding nations or peoples. In the 1960s, Canada established a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism which was mandated to recommend measures whereby the Canadian federation could be developed on the basis of an equal partnership between what was then referred to as its two founding peoples (the English and the French). Confederation, declared in 1867, was a new partnership between English and French colonists to manage lands and resources north of the 49th parallel. It was negotiated without reference to Aboriginal nations, the first partners of both the French and the English.

Beginning in the 1980s, the growing attention directed by Canadian opinion leaders towards aboriginal aspirations saw advocates of the founding peoples discourse evolve towards the three nation theory, thus rendering their concept more inclusive. In other words, the previously failed idea of two founding nations or peoples is presumably corrected by the addition of the Aboriginal peoples or nations. Gagnon and Rocher (1997) contend that: "…Canada has every advantage in rediscovering the fact that the country is a federation which endeavored from its inception to reconcile the existence of different national groups within a broader political entity. The failure to recognize this diversity mortgages the relationships among the various national components. They conclude that Canada's transformation into a multinational state is one possible means of alleviating the country's state of perpetual political crisis and ushering it into modernity."

Will Kymlicka believes that the real threat to Canada's long-term stability remains the failure to reach a satisfactory arrangement with Canada's non-immigrant national minorities – namely, the Québécois and the Aboriginal peoples. To get beyond Canada's constitutional impasse, the much-respected philosopher claims we need to accept that Canada is and will remain a multinational state – a federation of peoples. It is a view echoed by James Tully, who notes that in multinational federations like Canada it is essential to accord the status of peoples to the Québécois and the Aboriginal population and offer them a right to what he calls internal self-determination (Tully, 1999). Tully's Federative model differs from that of Kymlicka in that there are only two peoples or nations, and perhaps ironically, it can be described as a new version of the two-nations theory.

In the multinational Canada proposed by Kymlicka it is necessary to persuade English-speaking Canadians that they have common interests as a language-based community. These interests, he adds, are relatively similar to those of the Québécois and Aboriginals. Kymlicka refers to two major obstacles to the idea. He acknowledges that English-speaking

Canadians have little or no sense of group identity and little or no sense that they form a distinct community within Canada. Indeed surveys reveal that language is not the dominant marker of identity for English-speakers, with perhaps the exception of those who live in Quebec. If indeed the English language were the common marker of identity for Canadians outside of Quebec, how would they be different from other North Americans? Therefore Canada's anglophones must be convinced that they have similar 'national' identity needs, something that Kymlicka acknowledges is unlikely to resonate with this group.

But there are a number of other equally serious matters that would have to be overcome in order to attain popular support for this concept, including the presence of francophones outside Quebec and notably the Acadian population, which itself may lay claim to the status of nation. Would they be part of the English-Canadian nation? Conversely, would Quebec anglophones be part of the English-Canadian nation or the Québécois nation? The same question would apply to allophones both within Quebec and in the rest of Canada. In a hypothetical future negotiation between these nations, would their interests be represented on a territorial or linguistic basis? And would the sixty-plus Aboriginal nations each be individually recognized as such, or would they have to constitute one nation to accommodate the other two nations and not to upset a situation where the 'three' nations would deal with each other on a nation-to-nation basis? How does the three-nation theory take into account dual or multiple attachments of members of each 'nation'?

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Canadians outside of Quebec might choose to define themselves as several nations under a multinational model. Albertans and Newfoundlanders may insist upon national recognition were Quebec to secure it within such a redefined Canadian federation. Each has indicated on several occasions that it has interests that diverge from those expressed elsewhere in Canada. Political scientist Alan Cairns has argued that: "…the search for the ROC's reconstitution after Quebec's departure would, other things being equal, likely privilege provincial governments, especially those of the wealthier provinces, and thus lead to a more fragmented, provincialized successor state than would be probable if haste could be avoided. It might even result in two or more separate polities." (Cairns, 1998) No doubt it would suit some Quebecers if the rest of Canada were to constitute one nation, thus permitting the outdated notion that English and French peoples of Canada would interact as two equal nations.

Kymlicka and Tully propose a redefinition of the federation that is based on three different notions of nationhood that would be difficult to reconcile. The 'Québécois' nation would be territorially defined, the rest of Canada's national status would be based on the sharing of the English language, and the Aboriginals would in theory possess nations within the nation defined by ancestry and 'rootedness.' Undoubtedly the political value of 'national' status would vary considerably under such an ill-conceived formula. It is indeed curious that advocates of the Canadian multinational federation can easily carve an anglophone nation within the federation, but refuse to refer to a francophone nation in Canada, despite the fact that language is a powerful marker of identity for the country's French-speakers, not only within Quebec, but also outside the province. Clearly the sociological reality of the francophone nation within Canada runs counter to the political aspirations of nationhood advocated by certain Quebec thinkers.

National Recognition: Sociology and Politics?

Once responsible for Canada's constitutional dossier Stephane Dion (2001) claims that Quebecers form a nation in sociological terms – in the French sense of the word. According to Dion, in legal terms – in the English sense – it is Canada that constitutes a nation, that is an independent state with its own seat at the United Nations. Formerly responsible for Quebec's constitutional dossier, Joseph Facal (2001) retorts that Dion makes a false distinction between the English and French conceptions of nation and that in general the idea is defined in a similar manner. It is true that whether anglophone or francophone many Canadians fail to distinguish the sociological dimension of nationhood from its political expression. For many English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians, the idea of nation and country are synonymous. In this regard it is worth noting that from an identity standpoint English Canadians see Quebec's presence as a fundamental part of Canada's national identity. Létourneau (2000) argues that thinking about the future of Quebec without taking into account the centrality of the Canadian fact as part of the identity of Quebecers is akin to thinking about the future of Canada while neglecting the centrality of the French fact to Canadian identity.

Dion (2001) argues that: "…a nation exists as soon as humans consider that they form one. They feel like they share common historic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious traits and see themselves as a nation on that basis." Some Quebecers would no doubt argue that on this basis Canada does not form a nation in that it fails to share the aforementioned commonalities. Yet given its own diversity neither might Quebec qualify for such national status? Alternatively it might be argued that Quebec could consider itself a multinational federation with an English Canadian nation and Aboriginal nations.

VIVE LE QUANADA!

The ongoing debate over our Canada's constitutional future remains very much influenced by Quebecers' attachment to Quebec and Canada respectively. It is clear that over the past two decades there has been a diminishing identification with Canada amongst many francophones. For some, the extent to which one considers him or herself a Canadian, Quebecer, or both, is believed to be at the heart of the identity question. In an effort to get to the bottom of the issue, public opinion polls have obliged Quebecers to decide whether they identified more with Quebec or with Canada. Often, the way a question is formulated on attachments to Quebec and Canada has helped determine the results. Not surprisingly, such surveys have frequently uncovered an important dichotomy along linguistic lines where a greater percentage of francophones tended to choose Quebec first, while the overwhelming majority of non-francophones choose Canada. A Quebec-wide survey conducted by the research firm CROP (1998) noted that some 67% of Quebec respondents claimed that they were proud to be both Quebecers and Canadians and were upset when politicians asked them to choose between their two identities. However, when asked how they define themselves, some 51% of Quebec francophones declared they were Quebecers and then Canadians (37%) or just simply Quebecers (14%). Some 31% of francophones defined themselves as equally Canadian and Quebecer. For their part 47% of Quebec anglophones declared that they were Canadians first and then Quebecers (38%) or simply Quebecers (9%). Some 40% of Quebec anglophones defined themselves as being equally Canadian and Quebecer. The province's allophones more closely resembled the anglophone population as regards their national identification, and only 13% described themselves as either more Québécois than Canadian or Québécois only.

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The reality regarding the Quebec/Canada identity issue is frequently more complex than is revealed by these numerous surveys. First, the respondents are invited to attribute their own meaning to the concept of national identity where there may be some confusion with the notion of ethnicity, citizenship and region. In effect, even the choice of being a 'Quebecer' first may simply imply that for some the Canadian 'national' identification is less important than attachment to some ethno-national form of identity. Undoubtedly, respondents attribute different meanings to being a Quebecer. According to former Quebec Premier Jacques Parizeau: "The vast majority of non-francophones during the [1995] referendum reclaimed their desire to remain Canadian… their interest dictates this attitude. Until a referendum is won they will stay as they are. Following that they will adapt. Until then they are Canadians and proud to be …never will the Anglo-Quebecers accept to exchange their attachment to a vast majority in Canada against minority status in Quebec." (Parizeau, 1997)

We the People

In their pre-referendum manifesto for a sovereign Quebec, a leading group of intellectuals argued that: "…Quebecers form a people. Not all peoples need to form a sovereign state and Quebecers have for some time made efforts to operate within the Canadian federalist framework. But Canada refuses to recognize Quebec's status as a founding people and give it the tools it needs to develop fully. It is necessary to take note of the incapacity of Canada to see itself as a multinational state." Approximately two years after the 1995 referendum, Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard stated that: "If English Canada wants to hold a big contest to name us, let them do it. It's a waste of time. We aren't interested in such a contest. We know what we are called, it's the people of Quebec." (Bauch, 1997) It would seem that while for many Quebecers constitute a people, so too do Canadians. The survey cited earlier reveals that a vast majority of Quebecers regard themselves as being part of at least these two peoples (CROP, 1998).

Canada as a Multinational Federation: The People's Choice?

Kymlicka maintains that the 'Québécois' and Aboriginals agree that Canada is a multinational federation (1998). However, there is no evidence that public opinion in the province or elsewhere in Canada supports this notion. In September 2002, Environics asked some 2,000 persons to select a description of Canada that best represents their own view of the country. Of the three options offered a majority of Canadians described Canada as a multicultural country with two official languages, one-fifth saw Canada as a multinational federation consisting of three nations (the Quebecois nation, the English-Canadian nation and the Aboriginal nations) and some 13% as a country characterized by two founding peoples. Outside of Quebec two-thirds saw Canada as a multicultural country with two official languages. Within Quebec this vision was endorsed by 47% of the population. It still remained the most popular description amongst Quebecers, with some 30% opting for the multinational federation, and 18% the two founding peoples. Some three-quarters of immigrants view Canada as a multicultural country, a view shared by just less than half of Aboriginals surveyed. One-quarter of Aboriginals regard Canada as a multinational federation.

The idea of Canada as a multinational federation gains limited support amongst the 'member nations,' that is English-Canadians (19%), Quebecers (29%) and Aboriginals (24%). The exception to what is otherwise the rule is

amongst supporters of the Bloc Québécois most of whom endorse the concept of Canada as a multinational federation with 40% supporting the notion, 32% the multicultural vision with two official languages and 22% a Canada of two founding peoples (which is the highest level of support for this idea amongst the various sub-groups).

National Identity and Common Histories

Proponents of the idea that the province constitutes a 'single' nation have argued that, contrary to Canada, the citizens of Quebec possess a shared history and therefore a common destiny. A national public opinion survey of some 2,000 Canadians conducted at the end of September by the firm Environics does indeed point to differences between English and French Canadians as to what they consider the principal developments in Canada's history to be. Yet the same survey reveals an important divergence amongst Quebecers as to their view of the shared Canadian story.

When asked about the birth of Canada some 44% of the population indicated that it began with Confederation in 1867. While a majority of anglophones gave this response, francophones more often referred to the European settlement of New France as the event marking Canada's creation. But Quebecers are not united on this question. Those supporting the Federal Liberals were more inclined to associate Confederation with the origins of Canada, while those favoring the Bloc Québécois believed much more so that it was the settlement of New France. There was also a considerable generation gap in responses to the question with most Quebecers between 18 and 29 years of age contending that European settlement of New France is the turning point; those over the age of 45 trace the origin of Canada to Confederation.

When asked about the most significant event in Canada's history, once again there are divergences within the Canadian population along language lines. Whereas one out of five francophones in Canada regard the defeat of the French at the 1759 Battle of the Plains of the Abraham as the most significant event in the country's history, this response is given by less than one out of ten anglophone Canadians. Again, Quebecers are divided on this question along partisan lines. About one out ten Liberal supporters declared that the defeat of the colonists in New France at the Plains of Abraham is the most significant event in Canada's history, a view held by more than one-third of Bloc Québécois supporters. Generational differences are especially prevalent in responses given by Quebecers. A majority of those between the ages of 18 and 29 believe that the defeat of the French at the battle of the Plains of Abraham is the most significant event in Canada's history, a view shared by less than one of ten Quebecers over the age of 60.

The histories of Quebec and the rest of Canada are closely connected and represent stories of cooperation and conflict in a process than many describe as nation-building. It is hard to detach the major events that have shaped Quebec from those contributing to the evolution of Canada. Many Quebecers understand that they are not two separate stories characterized by irreconcilable goals and visions. It is just as difficult, if not more so, to argue that Quebec and Canada are distinct and separate nations with divergent memories and different aspirations. The fact that so many Quebecers wish to remain Canadian suggests however that this constitutes an important part of their identity.

Facing the Nation

Underlying the debate over multinational federations is the definition to be attributed to nationhood. In 1996, Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples referred to the term 'nation' as something that came into common usage in the 1970s to replace the word 'Indian,' which some people found offensive. Although the term First Nation is widely used, no legal definition of it exists. Among its uses, 'First Nations peoples' refers to the Indian peoples in Canada, both status and non-status. Some Aboriginal peoples have also adopted the term 'First Nation' to replace the word 'band' in the name of their community. In Canada the term nation is also used to refer to the Métis, who represent the mix of Aboriginal, English and French. Clearly some analysts employ the term in referring to Quebec as a stateless nation that should ultimately be past of the concert of nations as a former provincial Premier insists. Bernard Landry (2001) insists that the absence of Quebec from the summit of the Americas in 2001 demonstrates the price that a nation pays when it does not have its sovereignty. Clearly the Premier blurs the line between nation and country in numerous interventions. The national notion to which he seems to refer is the one that a majority of Quebecers have rejected twice, in 1980 and 1995.

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