VIVE LE QUÉBEC LIBRE @ 50: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF QUÉBEC'S INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT, 1967-2017

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On 24 July 1967, during a state visit to Expo '67, France's President General Charles de Gaulle proclaimed: "Vive le Québec libre (long live a free Québec)" from the balcony of Montréal's City Hall. In making this declaration he lent credibility to Québec's burgeoning independence movement at a pivotal time in the unity of the country. The government of Canada viewed de Gaulle's words as adding insult to injury as it occurred on the occasion of the President's official visit to the country as it marked its 100th anniversary. It put a damper on the celebratory mood across much of Canada. Underlying the celebration was much concern amongst the political class of the fragile state of the relationship between English and French Canadians. Canada's Prime Minister Lester Pearson tended to exercise great caution when speaking about Québec in the context of the festivities of the centenary and he generally limited his public remarks about Québec to the important contribution of the French population to the edification of Canada.

It is understandable that de Gaulle's remarks were seen as damaging for those who hoped to make the centennial an opportunity to promote unity then so badly needed between English and French Canadians. Some fifty years later, there remains debate about whether de Gaulle's remarks were a deliberate effort to bolster the independence movement or if he simply got carried away by the exuberant crowd that heard his words at City Hall. Either way, the speculation around what motivated de Gaulle has become a moot point. There has since been no convincing argument that has altered the generally accepted meaning and intent of the now famous pronouncement. Those Québec sovereignists old

enough to remember the event will inevitably embrace de Gaulle as a champion of the cause of Québec independence.

The reaction to de Gaulle's remarks by the government of Canada was quite swift. His intervention was described as a hostile encroachment by the leader of the a foreign government in the domestic affairs of Canada. The federal Minister of Justice (and the country's future Prime Minister) Pierre-Elliot Trudeau insisted that if a Canadian Prime Minister shouted publicly "Brittany to the Bretons" the reaction in France would have been no less severe. De Gaulle was unimpressed by Trudeau, saying some years later that "Nous n'avons aucune concession, ni même aucune amabilité, à faire à M. Trudeau, qui est l'adversaire de la chose française au Canada." ("We have not one concession, nor even any courtesy, to extend to Mr Trudeau, who is the enemy of the French fact in Canada.")

The response from René Lévesque was unsympathetic to de Gaulle. Prior to emerging as the iconic leader of Québec's independence movement, Lévesque was a prominent Québec politician with the federalist Québec Liberal party. Lévesque was purportedly stunned by de Gaulle's remarks and insisted that Quebecers did not need to be told what to do by France.[1]

As reflected in much of the national media, the ensuing diplomatic uproar resulted in de Gaulle cutting short his visit to Canada. The day after his speech, de Gaulle visited Expo 67 and hosted a banquet at the French pavilion and then rather than continuing his scheduled visit to Ottawa to meet with Prime Minister Lester Pearson, he chose to return to France.

THE LATE SIXTIES IN CONTEXT

As noted above, the 1960s were marked by important strains in the relationship between Québec and the rest of Canada (specifically between French and English Canadians). When asked in a September 1967 Gallup poll, some 42% of Canadians felt that relations between English and French-speaking Canadians had worsened over the previous five years (while some 30% felt that relations had gotten better over that period). An earlier Gallup Poll (conducted in January 1967) revealed that the vast majority of English Canadians felt that Canada's French population was well treated in both business and the civil service. (Canadian Gallup Poll, January 1967, #322). Yet during the late 1960s, the percentage of francophones in the public service of Canada was well below the share of francophones in the overall population of the country. Since that decade, the share of francophones in the federal civil service rose from about 20% in 1964 to nearly 30% by the beginning of the 21st century which is well ahead of the share of francophones in the Canadian population. Francophone representation in management positions in the federal public service has increased from 10.4% in 1964 to 18% in 1978 and to 30% in 2007.[2]

In that same decade, earnings amongst French Canadians were considerably less than they were for English Canadians. The economic condition of

1 www.ledevoir.com/societe/actualites-en-societe/504073/vive-le-quebec-libre

2 Annual Report on Official Languages 2006-2007. Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. 2009-02-10)

Québec's French population improved dramatically by the 1990s and by 2016 Statistics Canada data on income revealed that in Québec, annual median revenue was higher for the province's mother tongue francophones than it was for Anglophones. Still during the 1990s, there remained sufficient resentment on the part of French Quebcecers for historic inequities and a widely held sentiment that English Canadians refused to acknowledge the unique position that the French language occupied in Canada (as reflected for many Quebecers by the failed efforts at recognizing Québec's difference in the Constitution). The sense of grievance felt by many Québec francophones enabled Québec's independence movement to galvanize sufficient support to make for the narrowest of outcomes in the 1995 Québec referendum on sovereignty.

QUÉBEC AND CANADA: FIFTY YEARS LATER

Public interest in the 100th and 150th anniversaries of the country was roughly similar amongst Canadians. Polls conducted in 2017 reveal that there was considerably less enthusiasm among Québec francophones for the 150th anniversary commemorations than there was for other Canadians. Fewer than one in ten Québec francophones reported that they were very interested in the 150th anniversary and another one in three said they were fairly interested. When asked about participation in the 150th anniversary events, the intention to do so was even lower amongst Québec francophones.

TABLE 1

HOW INTERESTED WOULD YOU SAY YOU, YOURSELF, ARE IN CANADA'S 150TH ANNIVERSARY / CENTENNIAL YEAR	2017 LEGER	1967 GALLU
VERY INTERESTED	24%	32%
FAIRLY INTERESTED	48%	36%
NOT INTERESTED	23%	32%
CAN'T SAY	4%	0%

TABLE 2

DO YOU THINK THAT TODAY THE FEELINGS BETWEEN ENGLISH-SPEAKING AND FRENCH-SPEAKING CANADIANS ARE BETTER OR WORSE THAN THEY WERE SAY FIVE YEARS AGO?	2017	1967
BETTER	46	30
WORSE	18	42
DON'T KNOW/SAME	37	28

Source: Canadian Gallup Poll, September 1967, #325 and Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies

As regards relations between English- and French-speaking Canadians the 2017 survey suggests a much improved perception over the sentiment in 1967. In effect, more Canadians regard the relationship as better than they do worse, which is in marked contrast with the results on a similar question in 1967. The results lend little support to anyone who might wish to engage in nostalgia around an era where relations between French and English Canadians were more stable. Indeed, as regards the francophones surveyed in 2017, some 50% believe the relationship is better, while less than one in five think it's worse.

Some fifty years and two failed referendums later, the Québec independence movement is stagnant. Its current leadership appear unable to persuade enough Quebecers of the need to for a breakup from Canada. This isn't necessarily because of the quality of the individuals who are currently at the head of the movement as much as it's about the changing economic and political condition of francophones in Québec and elsewhere in Canada. As revealed in the table below, there is a perception that Quebecers' desire for separation from Canada is quite low, with fewer than one in ten Canadians who describe such sentiment as very strong (a marked difference by contrast with the results in 1967). Another one in three Canadians feel that the desire for separation is fairly strong. Still, the results amongst Quebecers give the impression that there is even less enthusiasm for a breakup, with some 3% indicating that the feeling is very strong and another 20% that it is very strong.

TABLE 3

HOW STRONG DO YOU, YOURSELF, THINK THE WISH FOR SEPARATISM IS, AMONG THE PEOPLE OF QUEBEC PROVINCE?	2017 LEGER	GALLUP 1967	2017 LEGER WITH REDISTRIBUTION OF DON'T KNOW
VERY STRONG	8%	20%	9%
FAIRLY STRONG	29%	21%	35%
NOT VERY STRONG	48%	59%	56%
CAN'T SAY	16%	-	-

Source: De Gaulle: the Aftermath

De Gaulle's intervention contributed to a change in the way that sovereignists and for matter other Quebecers viewed the province's relationship with France. The country became seen as a potential ally of Québec's independence movement. For Robin Gendron, de Gaulle's visit in 1967 was arguably the pivotal event in the France-Québec rapprochement of the 1960s. He describes de Gaulle's speech as the "…symbolic culmination of France's renewed interest in Québec and the national and cultural development of the French Canadian people after two centuries of relative neglect."

Gendron adds that "…the current scholarly consensus surrounding France-Québec relations in the 1960s holds that de Gaulle, and through him the

French government and state, developed a firm belief in Québec's right to national independence in the early to-mid 1960s and were convinced that France was compelled to support it because of the ties of history, culture, and sympathy that bound France to Québec."

In the aftermath of the collapse of the French colonial empire, some observers contend that de Gaulle and France were transformed into champions of decolonization for the world's remaining colonized peoples, especially for Quebercers. The idea that France had embraced such a mission is, according to Gendron, highly debatable if not manifestly incorrect. In point of fact, the only national aspirations that intrinsically mattered to de Gaulle and the French state were those of France itself, as can be demonstrated through even a cursory examination of the government's attitude toward another emerging "nationalist" movement half-way around the world from Québec in one of France's remaining colonial territories, the Pacific territory of New Caledonia.

It's worth noting that in the years that followed his famous speech, de Gaulle gave neither additional support for an independent Québec nor did he encourage any of his political successors to do so. Hence no subsequent French President has extended such a ringing endorsement to the Québec sovereignty movement. In 2008, in the midst of the global financial crisis, French President Nicholas Sarkozy declared that "the world needs a strong, united Canada that can take a leadership role". He described Canada as an ally of France and added that: "...if there is anyone who tells me that in today's world, we need more division, we do not see the world in the same way."[3] Judging by his initial feel-good interaction with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, it doesn't appear that current French President Emmanuel Macron sees things very differently.

CONCLUSION

As noted, when de Gaulle made his declaration, francophones in Québec and elsewhere in Canada encountered considerable economic inequality and were severely underrepresented in the federal civil service. As pointed out above, that changed dramatically by the turn of the century. The ideas of the sixties that saw Québec independence as a form of decolonization are a very tough sell today as the historic grievances that traditionally defined the sovereignty movement no longer carry the same resonance for most Québec francophones and notably appear to connect less with the younger generation. Collectively, Québec francophones no longer face the kinds of barriers and inequities they did in the 1960s and for many the feelings of resentment towards other Canadians seem increasingly like a distant memory. The younger generation of Quebecers will undoubtedly have greater difficulty relating to de Gaulle and his message despite the reminder some may have gotten had they even heard about the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of his "Vive le Québec Libre" speech.

3 http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/sarkozy-calls-for-unity-strength-in-canada-1.703066