THE ACTUALITY OF LAURENDEAU

ABSTRACT

Forty years ago, Laurendeau believed that Canada would either undergo fundamental changes or break apart. Canada did change, says the author, but in way that aggravated Laurendeau's concerns rather than alleviating them.

Looking back at the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* 40 years later provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the heritage left by André Laurendeau, one of the most interesting figures of Quebec's intellectual history. Although the debate on the "national question" has crystallized around the Trudeau-Lévesque confrontation, one could plausibly argue that Laurendeau's thoughts best capture the non-secessionist nationalism embraced by a majority of Quebecers generation after generation. The Laurendeau-type of nationalism was channelled politically largely by the nationalist wing of the Quebec Liberal Party (Claude Ryan, Robert Bourassa at times, the young Mario Dumont). It showed its face for instance in the support in Quebec for the Meech Lake Agreement. The prevalence of this language of nationalism also explains why all sovereignist leaders – including Jacques Parizeau in the 1995 referendum – championed one form or another of shared sovereignty projects rather than outright independence.

For Laurendeau, Canada in the 1960s failed to confer upon Quebec both the symbolic recognition and the political autonomy it needed to flourish as a "distinct society", as he famously put it. If he then rejected the incipient independence movement – which presented itself as a liberation/anticolonial struggle – he strongly felt that the non-recognition of the equal status of the two "founding peoples" empoisoned the Quebec-Canada relationship and constituted a threat for the future of the Canadian federation. Repudiating both the independence project and Trudeau's principled antinationalism, he pleaded in favour of a major reform of Canada along the lines of a bilingual, bicultural (i.e. binational) and asymmetric model of federalism. In the introduction he wrote for the B&B Report (the Blue Pages), he laid down the principles of a constitutional reform which would have guaranteed Francophones access to services in French and made it possible for them to "identify with the political institutions and the symbols of [their] country" (p. xli). According to him, the equality of the "founding" peoples of Canada *as peoples* had to become the "mainspring" ("idée-force") of the federation. In a passage presumably addressed to Trudeau, Laurendeau specified that "it is not cultural growth and development at the individual level which is at stake, but the degree of self-determination which one society can exercise in relation to another" (p. xlv).[1][1]

Trudeau disregarded Laurendeau's "idée-force" and implemented, between 1968 and 1984, his own preferred vision of Canada as a bilingual, multicultural and *uni*national political community. The 1982 'refoundation' of Canada put an end to the political ambiguity set in place by the BNAA and left no choice to many Quebecers but to forgo their conception of Canada as a binational federation.[2][2]

Laurendeau thought that the commission would lead Canada "either to its break-up, or to a new set of conditions for its future existence" (p. xvii). This was in 1967. Was he, bewitched by the problems and circumstances of his time, being too alarmist? Charles Taylor stated before the Bélanger-Campeau Commission – set in place as a response to the failure of the Meech Lake Agreement – that,

> We can envisage Quebec, at least as a starting point for this reflection, as a society free of all previous commitments, which is preparing to give itself structures that suit it and which, as a consequence, is thinking of proposing to one or some possible partners new arrangements that would be of common interest... On June 1990, the 1867 Constitution died morally in Quebec. It is necessary to create anew.[3][3]

It is not much of a stretch to think that a common thread unites Laurendeau's and Taylor's statements. Having benefited from the deliberation and research carried out in the wake of the B&B Commission, Laurendeau believed that Canada was at a crossroads: it would either undergo fundamental changes or break apart. As I just alluded to, Canada did change, but in way that aggravated the problem rather than alleviating it – at least from a Laurendeau-inspired point of view.

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The Meech Lake proposal was presented as a corrective for the adoption of the *Constitution Act, 1982* without Quebec's consent. Hence, for people like Taylor and many others, the failure of the Meech constitutional reform implied that Quebec was legitimately entitled to re-conceive its basic political status and, in so doing, its relation to Canada.

To the great disappointment of several nationalists, Premier Bourassa squandered the post-Meech capital of political freedom in the Charlottetown round of negotiations. The Meech and Charlottetown failures were then presented by sovereignist leaders as irrefutable proofs of the impossibility to amend the Canadian constitution in a way acceptable to Quebecers. The 1987-1992 constitutional fiasco explains, to a great extent, why so many soft nationalists voted in favour of sovereignty in 1995.

With a second defeated referendum that demonstrated the displeasure in Quebec with the state of the federation, the Laurendeau vision was once again shattered. The federal government's answer was *not* to reconsider the basic premises of the Quebec-Canada relationship and seek to accommodate some of Quebec's claims, but rather to heighten Canadian nationalism and to play the hard line toward Quebec (Plan B). When the Supreme Court of Canada canvassed a promising framework of constitutional amendment in 1998 (the right to initiate public deliberation around a constitutional change proposal and the correlative duty to negotiate the proposal, granted that the four basic principles of Canadian constitutionalism were respected)[4][4], the federal government quickly double-locked the door by tying Quebec's right to self-determination to highly constraining conditions (the *Clarity Bill*). On the administrative side of things, major disagreements erupted over such issues as social union, higher education, health care funding and the existence of a "fiscal imbalance."

The post-referendum period was thus characterized by a clash of nationalisms, rather than by an open political dialogue over the reform of Canadian federalism. Of course, the PQ was too dogmatically committed to sovereignty to ever consider working on a hypothetical reform of Canada. Be that as it may, the "general store" of constitutional reform was "closed", as Jean Chrétien delicately said to Jean Charest during the 1998 election campaign.

In the meantime, and this is the point I want to stress, Quebec was furthering its Quiet Revolution. The symbolic transformation of Quebec identity initiated in the 1960s reached new stages. Paradoxically, the success of French-Canadian nationalism caused the dissolution of French-Canadian identity in Quebec. French-Canadian ethnic nationalism was successful in turning French-Canadians into a real and effective majority within Quebec. French-Canadians or, more accurately now, Quebecers of French-Canadian origins, began to feel and act as an empowered majority in Quebec, rather than as a subjugated minority in Canada. This "Quebecisation" process, heavily supported by the development of the Quebec state, ineluctably raised the question of the status of all those inhabitants of Quebec who are not of French-Canadian origins. From the first government of the Parti Québécois to the present, an ongoing discussion on the contours and character of Quebec identity has taken place.[5][5] The debate was, and still is, sometimes laborious (Parizeau's exclusivist "We" on the referendum night), but it nevertheless opened up on a state-sponsored civic and plural conception of national identity endorsed and continuously redefined by a majority intellectuals and political leaders.[6][6]

This internal process of self-interpretation and self-determination is all the more intense since the 1995 referendum. With the failures of the last 15 years, Quebecers seem to have deci-ded to push the "Quebecisation" process further, i.e. to consolidate Quebec identity and political community as far as possible within the current constitutional order. As I just alluded to, modes of accommodating cultural diversity and of conciliating the aspirations of the majority and the minorities – which are themselves not homogeneous – have been the object of constant debate in the past 25 years. This has yielded, against all odds, the "Peace of the Braves" with the Eeyou (Crees) and the current negotiations with the Innus (Montagnais). Similar processes have taken place in many other fields.

This stance is particularly natural for the first generation, so to speak, of Quebecers who did not live through the transition from French-Canadian to Quebec identity.[7][7] This generation grew up in the post-Quiet Revolution Quebec society. For many of them, sovereignty is not the necessary pathway to survival and freedom, but just one possible answer to the constitutional stalemate. They are also the children of the language laws (bills 22 and 101) that shattered the quasi-hermetic frontier between francophones and immigrants in making French a common public language. Even young anglophones are affected by the quebecisation process: an incredibly high 89% of young anglophones between ages 18 and 24 can speak French and half of Quebec anglophones deem it legitimate for the government of Quebec to pass legislation to defend French language.[8] Quebec anglophones are themselves developing a self-consciousness as distinct within Canada.

This is not to say that Quebec has become a multicultural paradise. Minor and major disagreements still erupt between citizens of all origins in Quebec, as can occur in any multicultural and multinational democracy.[9][9] What stands out however is the constant process of reworking and consolidating the Quebec identity and polity. Canada, to some extent, has disappeared from the radar screen.

I often ask myself, how does Canada progress while Quebec is acting, as far as it can, as a sovereign nation? Will the children of the Quiet Revolution and Trudeau's heirs be capable of reforming Canada in a way minimally acceptable to both sides? I do not know, but my hunch is that we do not have any more reason to be optimistic than Laurendeau had.[10][10] Some observers like to think, in the wake of the PQ's recent defeat, that the hard line "killed" separatism. Leaving wishful thinking aside, it seems much more plausible to me to say that the hard-line artificially maintains separatism alive. In fact, it is the Quiet Revolution that "killed" separatism. A form of nationalism, called "*affirmationnisme*" by many, will remain, but the future of the sovereignty depends upon the continued principled non-accommodation of Quebec's (multinational) vision of Canada. In that sense, maybe Laurendeau was right: the rejection of the B&B Report did (and still does) represent a menace for the future of the Canadian federation.