CANADA'S SOLITUDES, OLD AND NEW

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ABSTRACT

Nearly 80 years after appearing in the writings of Hugh MacLennan, the phrase "Canada's two solitudes" continues to resonate today.[1] One can even say that new solitudes were added, making Canada more complex to manage. The national political and administrative institutions in Canada remain ill-equipped to accommodate solitudes, both old and new. Moreover, it may well be that the institutions themselves have contributed to the development or strengthening of those solitudes. The solitudes are not rooted only in language issues. New solitudes have emerged and are the product of divergent or contradictory regional economic interests. This chapter aims to provide an update on the situation of these Canadian solitudes, old and new.

OLD SOLITUDES

Hugh MacLennan's novel clearly depicted the kind of interactions that existed between Anglophone and Francophone Canadians in 1945. Everybody, including French-speaking Quebecers, converged then around the idea that a French-Canada existed and was composed of the people living in Quebec and of about one million Canadians living throughout the nine other provinces. At that time, the Catholic Church was a unifying force that bound French Canadians together in a community of shared interests.

Religion, politics and business were essential parts of a unique whole where religion was the dominant force. The Catholic Church's survival ensured the survival of French-Canada, and not many French Canadians would have had any doubt in 1945 as to the survival of the church for another thousand years.

Communication between French Canada and English Canada was very limited. The means by which we communicated then were not as elaborate as they are today, but that was not the sole factor explaining this situation. One only has to read MacLennan's novel in order to understand why those two communities had so little in common and hence why communication between the two solitudes was limited.

To the extent to which communication took place, it often happened in Ottawa, where communicating was necessary in order to ensure that the government was functioning properly. However, aside from parliament proceedings, the language spoken by the government was English.

Today, the Catholic Church has lost a lot of ground, and few people, if any, would associate the survival of French Canada to the Catholic Church. French Canada has lost its unifying force. When the Church lost its dominance, French Canadians turned to the state in order to ensure their survival. However, Quebecers and French Canadians living outside of Quebec could not turn to the same government. Before long, those two communities had defined their priorities, which were different if not completely contrary. We have reached the point – or are on the verge of reaching it – where two solitudes have developed within French Canada.

Quebec envisions its survival in quite a different manner than do French Canadians outside of Quebec. We do not hear Quebecers speak of French Canada anymore. They have come to consider their survival independently from the French Canadian community outside of its borders. A recent study shows how Radio Canada stresses issues related to Quebec while barely addressing questions related to Canada and to francophones living outside of Quebec. Increasingly, Radio Canada, a federally funded institution, has been accused of becoming a quebecocentric mouthpiece. Over the last few months, a scientific study has been backing up these accusations[2].

English Canada seems two have lost interest in Quebec and in issues of national unity. In an opinion letter published in *La Presse* and the *Globe and Mail* on the 29th of June of 2012, I asked: who will step in to speak for Canada if ever Quebec pushes Canada back into a crisis of national unity? My answer: support towards unity will be much less strong and far-reaching than it was during the Quebec referendum in 1995. One recalls that all of Ontario's available coach buses were made available to drive down to Quebec and that 75 full buses left New Brunswick in order to participate in a love-in in Montreal so as to show Quebecers that Canada cared deeply about Quebec and wanted it to maintain its place amid the Canadian family. A great number of fellow citizens flew in or came by train or car from Western Canada, Ontario and Atlantic Canada in order to join in on the love-in[3].

Times have changed. Western Canada is much more self-confident than it was in 1995. Ontario seems to have lost interest toward national unity. In fact, the message that Ontario's provincial government and focus groups are constantly sending is that Ontario has not been getting its due piece of the federal government spending pie. A good number of citizens from Atlantic Canada echo other Canadians in saying: "Go on Quebec, it's up to you to decide whether you stay or you go".

In short, the two old solitudes still exist. In fact, they are withdrawing more and more from each other, preoccupied by their own challenges, which are mostly economic in nature. The only difference is that one of the solitudes has split in two new solitudes; the two new French Canadas are now pursuing very different goals.

Globalization, the advent of new means of communication, largely stimulated by innovations having emerged from the English-speaking world (the internet and social media) and the competitiveness of the new economy makes English-speaking Canada focus on economic issues. As a result, English-Canada has split and new solitudes in the Canadian English-speaking world is taking form.

NEW SOLITUDES ARE EMERGING AS THE NATIONAL ECONOMY COLLAPSES

Canada has never ceased trying to adapt its political and administrative institutions, which were designed for a unified state, so that they can suit the needs of a federal system. Due to globalization, cracks in the system are starting to become more noticeable now more than when national economies were more self-reliant.

Canadian political writers and observers of Canadian federalism did not pay enough attention to John A. Macdonald's wish to apply a British model of political institutions to the Canadian federal state. The impact of such an aspiration can be felt from the outset of Confederation. The movement towards confederation emerged through Ontario's and, to a lesser degree, Quebec's leadership. Ontario saw economic advantages in the union of the Canadas, which would then be joined by the Maritime Provinces. John Ibbitson writes that national political institutions purposefully advantaged Ontario's economic interests and made Ontario "the one and only imperial province. The clearest, and most

overwhelmingly so, demonstration of this imperialism was the National Policy"[4].

Canada's National Policy's intent was to promote the country's manufacturing sector, which, incidentally, advantaged the Windsor-Quebec corridor. Policymakers coming from areas around the corridor came to the conclusion that this was simply what had to be done in order to build a national economy. Without an Upper House to represent the other parts of the country at parliament, the most populated central region of the country had the better end of the deal when it came to policy making, and they still do. Furthermore, the National Policy had very little to offer to the West and the Maritimes. Because of economic protectionism and the National Policy, manufacturers from the Maritimes had to ship their products toward central Canada via train at high cost instead of shipping them by boat to their usual export markets in New England and elsewhere.

But this overview is far from being complete. An inherent bias running throughout national political and administrative institutions can be seen every time Ottawa takes an important economic decision. For example, 32 state companies where created in order to support the war effort between the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. All of those 32 companies were established in the two most inhabited provinces: Ontario and Quebec[5]. In turn, to a great degree, Canada's modern manufacturing sector's origins can be traced back to those companies.

However, again, these facts do not offer a complete portrait of the situation. The Auto Pact, an agreement entered into by the U.S. and Canada in 1965, established a viable manufacturing industry in southern Ontario. The Auto Pact had an instant impact on southern Ontario. In 1964, only 7% of cars build in Canada were sold in the United States; in 1968, this number rose to 60%. The automotive industry provides nearly 100 000 Canadians with a job, nearly 90% of which are in Ontario[6]. Many other similar examples can be given.

Canada's public service is loyal to the political party in power, and the Constitution does not attribute any kind of distinctive personality to it, as least in theory[7]. It also forms an administrative institution which is strongly centralized. Almost every senior position in politics and the majority of top-level positions are held by individuals in the National Capital Region.

Globalisation, regional free trade agreements and the importance of the energy sector have serious repercussions on the national economy. It is no mere accident that Ontario's government and citizens were vigorously opposed to the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the United States, while Quebec and New-Brunswick's leaders and citizens were supportive of it.[8]

The day Ontario became affected by payments of equalization, a wave of discontent flew throughout the Canadian federation. The energy sector, demographic growth and the increasing political power of western Canada are in the process of redefining Canadian regions and the relationship between the provinces. Western Canada is profusely selling oil and other natural resources to foreign markets, thus strengthening the value of the Canadian dollar. The manufacturing industry in central Canada can no longer rely on the National Policy and high custom taxes in order to protect its local businesses.

Western Canada remains convinced that its strong economic growth is due to its natural resources and entrepreneurial skills. No credit is attributed to the federal government. Indeed, for a great number of Western Canadians, the memory of the disastrous impact the National Energy Program (NEP) had on the regional economy in the beginning of the 1980s is still fresh. This example goes to show that Canada's regions are focusing on their own needs or turning towards foreign markets in order to define the new economic route they plan on taking. The shortcomings of our national political and administrative institutions are undermining the unity of this country.

Canada is a country formed by regions and, apart from Ontario, those regions are coming to the realization that the national political institutions in place are unable to deal adequately with their socioeconomic interests. In the past few years, Ontario has started echoing other Canadian regions by stating that federal policies are detrimental to provincial interests. The Ontario government insists that Ottawa's policies on transfer payments, immigration and Senate reform, amongst others, are not consistent with Ontario's political platform and its efforts to develop economic growth.[9]

David McGuinty, a liberal Member of Parliament representing Ottawa in the House of Commons, alluded to history and Ontario's role in the Confederation when

he made a remark that federal MPs from Alberta should go back to Alberta and run for provincial legislature or for municipal office because they are "unable" to hold a "national vision"[10]. For many Western Canadians or Atlantic Canadians, however, the term "national" is a code word referring to Ontario's economic interests.[11]

The Aboriginal communities of Canada are also another one of Canada's solitudes. They demand that their voices be heard during constitutional debates. They are trying to find a way to coexist amidst the Canadian family while trying to demonstrate that our national political institutions are not suited to address their aspirations.[12]

CASTING A GLANCE AT THE FUTURE

Unless Canada's political and administrative institutions undergo a reform that will acknowledge the socioeconomic particularities of every region, old and new solitudes will continue to shape Canada's political debates. It is urgent that our institutions recognize that Canada is a country of regions. The term "national" only resonates in Ontario, but even Ontario cannot hold the pretence anymore of speaking for the common interest. Changes in the economic situation redefine the relationships between the Canadian regions, creating new solitudes and reinforcing old ones. Our institutions have to be readjusted so that these solitudes do not become irreconcilable.

NOTES

1 Hugh MacLennan, *Two Solitudes*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 2008.

2 Bruce Cheadle, « Étude : La SRC serait trop centrée sur le Québec et ne remplirait pas son mandat », *La Presse Canadienne*, October 14, 2012, www.huffingtonpost.ca.

3 « Vers une tempête parfaite », *La Presse*, June 29, 2012; and « Who will speak for Canada », *Globe and Mail*, June 29, 2012.

4 John Ibbitson, *Loyal No More: Ontario's Struggle for a Separate Destiny*, Toronto, HarperCollins, 2001) : 4-5.

5 See Donald J. Savoie, *Visiting Grandchildren: Economic Development in the Maritimes*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006 : 30-31.

6 See Canada, Statistics Canada, « Nombre d'emplois manufacturiers – Véhicules automobiles et pièces de véhicules automobiles », table 2180024.

7 Donald J. Savoie, *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008.

8 See « Canada-US Free Trade: Signed on the dotted line », *CBC Digital Archives*, n.d., www.cbc.ca/archives.

9 Mathew Mandelson et al, *Canada: The State of the Federalism, 2010: Shifting Power: The New Ontario and What it Means for Canada*, Montréal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013, coll. « Queen's Policy Studies ».

10 « MP McGuinty drops critic role over "go back to Alberta, gibe" », www.theglobeandmail.com, November 21, 2012.

11 See Savoie, *Visiting Grandchildren*.

12 Alan Cairns, *First Nations and the Canadian State: In Search of Coexistence*, Kingston, Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, Queen's University, 2002.