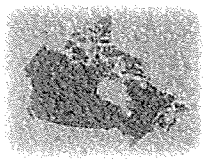
Are We Ahead of Where We Were?



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Are Canada's anglophones and francophones any closer to mutual understanding today than they have been in the past? Certainly, a number of factors that once divided us no longer exist. And yet, they still often mark our relations in unfortunate ways.

One could say that the most fundamental divider has disappeared: the conquest itself, British rule, Canada's participation in the British Empire. All that is over, done with. Canada governs itself; and English Canadians, now an ethnically and racially diverse population, do not see themselves as part of a greater British nation or see Canada's place in the world as defined by its role in the empire.



And yet! ... almost every year I seem to come across some student (an anglophone, but whose ethnic origin may be Italian, Portuguese, or even Chinese) who bursts out in class: "We conquered them, didn't we? How come they still speak French and why are they still making trouble?" It's as if in some way the English-speaking group – a dominant majority in Canada – has assimilated the conquest into its consciousness, not as an imperial phenomenon, not as a matter of colonial control, but as establishing a relationship of dominance between anglophones and francophones (the majority and the minority) in Canada.

Many francophones, in fact, have seen the matter that way. The historian Lionel Groulx called Confederation an extension of the conquest. French president Charles de Gaulle described it as a creation of British imperialism designed to perpetuate imperial control. More recently, political scientist Christian Dufour has described Canada as "a country built on the Conquest", while Laval University anthropologist Eric Schwimmer has argued that Quebeckers can never be properly freed of the Conquest unless they free themselves from Confederation.

Thus, notwithstanding the departure of Britain and her empire from Canadian life, the British conquest still haunts French-English relations in Canada.

One thing that divided us profoundly a century ago, but no longer does so, is the opposition between ultramontane Catholicisim and liberalism. As ultramontanism increasingly influenced the culture of French Canada after 1840, it brought strong resistance to the liberalism that prevailed in English Canada – particularly to the liberal idea of separation of Church and State. Nowhere did that show up more dramatically than in the schools question. In English Canada governments established public schools with non-denominational or secular programmes. But as they did so, they usually withdrew funding from Catholic and other church-run schools that had previously received it, and that provoked strong resistance by Catholic communities who felt the loss as an injustice. The great school controversies of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, and the North-West Territories were fought over this issue. In Quebec, on the other hand, where a different view of education and of Church-State relations prevailed, government-funded schools were organised on a denominational basis so that Catholic schools could be supervised by the clergy and given a programme seriously informed by Catholic doctrine.

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But the influence of ultramontanism in Quebec went beyond that, for it actually made Catholicism itself appear to be an essential element of the French-Canadian identity – and it taught that the French-Canadian nation, its journalists and its politicians, had a special responsibility to embody and advance the cause of Catholicism. Thus, French Canadians in Quebec felt bound to defend Catholic schools in other provinces, even when the great majority of Catholics in those provinces were not French Canadians themselves. So close did the association become between Catholicism and the French-Canadian nation that assaults on Catholic school funding came to be seen as assaults on French Canada. In retrospect they would be seen as assaults on the French language, even when, as in the case of New Brunswick or of Manitoba before 1916, French continued to be used as a language of instruction in public schools.

Today, neither Quebec nor French Canada sees Catholicism as defining its identity; Quebec has abolished its denominational schooling and become as secular as any province in Canada; yet the legacy of those 19th-century school disputes still embitters our relations, for they are remembered not as battles in the wars of Church and State, of liberalism and ultramontanism, but as attacks on French Canada by a persecuting and hostile English Canada. In that way they prolong mistrust and a feeling of irreconcilable difference.

This is not to say that nothing can diminish that feeling. The secularisation of French Canada and the transformation of Quebec into a multi-ethnic and multicultural francophone society have increased the resemblances between anglophone and francophone values and outlooks. Modern technology has very largely reduced the gap between what was known of public events by francophones and anglophones; and simultaneous translation, computer technologies, and the globalisation of TV images have all made highly unlikely the kind of information dichotomy that we saw in the Riel affair. Nor have we failed completely to learn from the past. Most of us have come at least to understand that you can't build a united Canada on linguistic assimilation or by forcing all Canadians into a single cultural mould.

And yet, even here we have not really escaped our problems – not, at any rate, the fundamental problem that gave rise to assimilationism in the first place. I mean the English-Canadian anxiety about national unity.

National unity was not always a Canadian obsession. Nobody objected, in 1864, when George-Etienne Cartier told the Quebec conference that federalism rather than national unification suited British North America because "these provinces are peopled by different nations and by peoples of different religions" – or in 1865 when he said that confederation would create only a "political nationality" concerned merely with "defence, tariff, excise, public works". It was only after the Riel affair and the nationalist Quebec government of Honoré Mercier that English Canadians began to talk about "national unity". And they have always meant by that a kind of cultural unity (because it was precisely the cultural differences between French and English Canada that threatened to tear Confederation apart) — if not unity of language or religion, at least a unity in basic values and feelings. The expression "national unity" reflected the idea that Canada – or any country – could not live and develop effectively as a mere political structure, a mere "political nationality". Its inhabitants needed to become one people, with a common feeling of Canadianism, common values, a common vision.

We no longer think that we can achieve all that through anglicisation. But we still seek to achieve it. We seek it in national health and welfare programmes (think of the claim that such programmes are what give Canadians an identity distinct from that of Americans); in national symbols; in hockey; in multiculturalism; and in the action of the federal government, which we refer to insistently as a "national government".

But attempts to make Canadians one people have always run up against the feeling of a large portion of Quebeckers that they are already their own people and that the government of Quebec is the only one that can represent them as a people. That leaves us in an impasse still. Can we get out of it? In his conclusion to As I Recall/Si je me souviens bien: Historical Perspectives (IRPP, 1999), Guy Rocher wrote that we seemed "not up to the challenge" of doing so. It seemed that the more we tried, the more tightly we wedged ourselves into our dead end, with English Canadians trying to fight Quebec separateness by pushing "national unity" and Quebec nationalism growing in response.

If Professor Rocher is right, then we cannot claim to have learned very much about each other or to have made much progress toward a common understanding. ■