LOOKING BACK AT THE ROLE OF MINORITIES IN THE QUIET REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the Quiet Revolution Quebec's ethnic minorities, for historical reasons, largely lived in social isolation from the Francophone majority and used English as their primary language. To a large extent this made them observers rather than participants in the Quiet Revolution, although there were some prominent exceptions. Because of this they did not fully understand the significance of the Quiet Revolution and were not psychologically prepared for the language legislation of the 1970s, which radically altered their situation. Although many left Quebec, most stayed and have adapted reasonably well to the more egalitarian and more integrated Quebec of today.

The role of Quebec's minorities (Anglo-Protestants, Irish Catholics, Italians, Jews and others) in the Quiet Revolution can only be understood when it is recalled that prior to 1960 these minorities lived in a world, or worlds, of their own that was relatively little influenced by Francophone Quebec society or by the Quebec state. This was somewhat less true of those minorities that lived in rural areas and of those who shared the Catholic faith of the Francophone majority, but even they lived in a state of relative isolation that seems bizarre by modern standards. This situation, which the Quiet Revolution largely ended, can be traced back to five closely related factors that were of central importance to the development of Quebec:

- The British tradition of indirect rule dating back to the *Quebec Act* of 1774.
- The superior economic status of the Protestants, and to some extent also of the Jews.
- The consociational regime that largely governed relations among Quebec's ethno-cultural groups.
- The lack of proficiency in the French language among most minorities.
- The fact that the Quebec state intervened to only a limited extent in matters that fell under provincial jurisdiction elsewhere in Canada, such as education and social services, in effect delegating its jurisdiction to the Catholic Church and to private initiative.

Although it may be assumed that most minorities who voted in 1960, particularly in urban areas, voted for the Liberals, they certainly did not do so in anticipation that major changes in Quebec society were imminent, nor would they have anticipated that even if they had expected the Liberals to win, which very few did. They had little awareness of the growing opposition among Francophones to the Union Nationale, the increasing dissatisfaction with the ethnic division of labour in Quebec, or the changes taking place within Catholicism. The media that they read, watched or listened to must be held largely responsible for this state of ignorance.

And as the Quiet Revolution gradually took place over the next twenty years, minorities were largely spectators rather than participants, although there were some important exceptions. At least until 1970, it is fair to say that the Quiet Revolution was almost viewed by non-Francophone Quebec minorities as something happening somewhere else and involving other people, like the struggle of African-Americans for civil rights or the dismantling of the British and French colonial empires.

The victory of the Liberals in 1960, and most of the reforms that resulted, were at first welcomed and interpreted as evidence that Quebec was finally getting in step with the rest of Canada. Hospital insurance, free tuition in high school, a merit-based public service, a ministry of education, and even public ownership of hydro (which already existed

in Montreal since 1944) were naturally viewed with favour. There was no understanding that the backwardness of *la grande noirçeur* , which most Anglophones derided, was the source of their privileges, and that a modernized and more "normal" Quebec would inevitably place those privileges in danger, even if it remained part of a united Canada.

As time went on, this complacent attitude was gradually undermined. The FLQ bombings of 1963, the emergence of the RIN and other movements demanding an independent Quebec, the controversy over bilingual education in St. Léonard, the increasingly frequent demonstrations and protests, particularly those directed against the royal visit in 1964 and against McGill University in 1969, and the endless speculation about whether René Lévesque was really a "separatist", all contributed to a gradual build-up of anxiety. Even the sudden emergence of the Créditiste movement in federal politics in 1962 and the unexpected return to office of the Union Nationale in 1966 caused considerable disquiet, although neither event was actually threatening to the status quo. The election of 1970, when many Anglophones persuaded themselves that the Parti Québécois had a serious chance of winning, produced another brief surge of anxiety, followed by relief at the victory of the Liberals.

However, the decisive event was Bill 22 in 1974. Innocuous as it seems now compared to what followed, this legislation produced a real sense of fear and anger, reinforced by a conviction that Anglophones had been stabbed in the back by the Liberal party that most of them had supported in every election since 1939. It is interesting that there was much less reaction to Bill 65 in 1971, which brought health and social service institutions, including those that mainly served minorities, under the direct control of the state.

Bill 22, of course, failed to prevent the Liberals from being outflanked on the issue of language by the Parti Québécois. The victory of the PQ in 1976 was soon followed by Bill 101, the *Charter of the French Language*, which was more interventionist than Bill 22, although not really extreme. This in turn led to a massive exodus of Anglophones from the province and eventually the formation of organizations like Alliance Québec and the Equality Party by some of those who chose to remain. However, these developments fall outside the chronological boundaries of the Quiet Revolution, so I will refrain from discussing them in further detail.

Getting back to the Quiet Revolution, there were some non-French Quebeckers who did play a significant part in it. The most important of these was undoubtedly Eric Kierans, who was a minister in the Lesage government, first of Revenue and then of Health, from August 1963 until the government lost office in June 1966. Although not fully fluent in French, and coming from the unlikely background of McGill and the Montreal Stock Exchange, Kierans proved to be an important member of the Liberal party's left wing, and a close friend and ally of René Lévesque (although the two friends eventually parted company over the issue of sovereignty-association, their mutual regard for one another survived even that). It is worth stating that Kierans was a Catholic of Irish and German ancestry rather than a Protestant of British ancestry.

A politician of a very different kind who deserves to be remembered was the legendary Frank Hanley, the independent member for Ste. Anne. Although he enjoyed playing the role of the colourful Irish politician, Hanley a serious person who understood and sympathized with what was going on in Quebec. He was the only Anglophone who spoke in favour of the bill to make the Legislative Assembly into the National Assembly.

Also deserving of mention is Michael Oliver, who taught a course on French Canadian politics at McGill for many years and introduced the subject of the Queit Revolution to many Anglophone students. His dissertation on the social and political ideas of Quebec nationalism was, incredibly, not published until 1991, thirty-five years after he wrote it, but it is well worth reading even today.

In the Bourassa government of 1970-76 the minority representation, which included two of my fellow contributors, was unusually strong both in quality and quantity. In fact, the same could be said for the second Bourassa government after 1985, at least until the conflict over Bill 178 in 1989 led to three resignations from cabinet. The Parti Québécois, of course, had great difficulty attracting minority voters, let alone electing minority members to the National Assembly, and the government of 1976-85, through no fault of its own, had no minority representatives in cabinet. If the Legislative Council had still existed at that time, it might, and probably would, have been used to overcome this deficiency.

The election of a Parti Québécois government in 1976, which arguably led to the completion of the Quiet Revolution begun in 1960, was viewed with dismay by most of Quebec's minorities for at least two reasons. First, the new government's promise to adopt more stringent legislation to protect the French language, as it actually did when the *Charter of the French Language* became law in August 1977. Second, the prospect of a referendum on sovereignty-association, which took place in May 1980 and resulted in a decisive defeat for the government's proposal for sovereignty. Meanwhile, the number of Quebec residents with English mother tongue declined by 100,000 between 1976 and 1981, largely because of out-migration to Ontario and Alberta due to both political and economic reasons.

The practice of consociational elite accommodation, which had worked for Quebec's minorities (or at least its Anglo-Protestant minority) since 1867, was clearly no longer viable after 1976, and the immediate result was a flurry of organizational activity culminating in the formation of Alliance Québec in 1982. Encouraged and funded by the federal government, this organization attempted to mobilize all the regional, ethnic and religious sub-groups of non-Francophone Quebec into an effective political lobby. For a while it seemed to have some success, but its popularity declined sharply after 1989, when it failed to prevent the adoption of Bill 178, which perpetuated the ban on outdoor bilingual signs. A new political vehicle, the Equality Party, emerged and elected four members to the National Assembly in 1989, but it disappeared after the next election. Alliance Québec lingered on until 2005, when the termination of the federal grant on which it was almost totally dependent finally put it out of its misery.

By that time, Anglophones who remained in Quebec had adapted reasonably well to the new order of things and were increasingly integrated, and intermarried, with the Francophone majority. Two-thirds of them could speak French, or at least claimed the ability to do so, and many were enrolling their children in French schools. In March 2011 the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages issued a report on "The Vitality of Quebec's English-Speaking Communities" which noted that the Anglophone population, measured by the criterion of "first official language spoken" had returned by 2006 to the level of 1971, after a significant decline in the intervening years. It did however express some concern about the small and scattered Anglophone populations outside of greater Montreal and the Gatineau region, whose access to English-language health care, education, and cultural activities is limited.

Today Quebec's most significant problem of minority/majority relations concerns not language but religion. Large numbers of Muslim immigrants, and a smaller but significant component of ultra-orthodox Hasidic Jews, fit uneasily into a secular Quebec that increasingly supports the rigid *laicité* of France's Third Republic and wishes to keep religion of any kind in the closet. On the other hand, they are also resented by conservative Quebeckers who believe that Quebec's traditional Catholic faith should at the very least be first among equals. Muslim and Hasidic demands for "reasonable accommodation" of their distinctive beliefs and practices led to a backlash from both secularists and traditional Catholics, and the Quebec government responded by appointing the Bouchard-Taylor commission of inquiry in 2007.

When I published my book on the Anglophones of Quebec more than a decade ago, *La Presse* featured the book in a prominent article under the headline "The Quiet Revolution: A Disaster for Anglophones". That is not exactly what the book said, and whether it is true is a matter of interpretation. The Quiet Revolution certainly ended, although not right away, the traditional ethnic division of labour in Quebec that had existed for more than two centuries, and the segmented society with autonomous minorities running their own affairs that resulted from it. So perhaps it was a disaster for "the Anglophone community" as traditionally understood, but that is not to say a disaster for individual members of Quebec's various minorities. Many left and pursued careers elsewhere; many who stayed and became fluent in French blended into their changing environment and continue to occupy important positions in Quebec society and politics. The Quebec of today is a more integrated, more egalitarian, and more harmonious society than the Quebec of half a century ago. Perhaps in conclusion I may echo the words of Lady Gregory, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat and patroness of Irish culture in the early twentieth century, when she wrote that the Irish revolution had eliminated the class to which she belonged but that from a broader and more impartial perspective that may have been just as well.