

## SHARED GEOGRAPHIES, DIVIDED HISTORIES THE CANADA-QUEBEC IMPASSE

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### Abstract

In the Canadian province of Quebec serious attempts to gain sovereignty are alive the third decade of this century already. The nation-state status, aspired by the francophone community, was almost realized after the second referendum on that issue. In 1995 voters supporting the Canadian confederacy have, by a narrow margin of only 0.8 %, defeated eligible voters of the province seeking independence. The third referendum attempt, initiated by the PQ — the Party Quebecois, in the year 2000, could result into the succession of the province of Quebec from Canada. The author discusses demographic, economic, social, cultural and political issues speaking for and against the succession.

Key words: Political geography, Francophones, Sovereignty, Quebec, Kanada.

### ZDRUŽEVALNA GEOGRAFIJA, RAZDVAJAJOČA ZGODOVINA KANADSKO-QUEBEŠKA SLEPA ULICA

### Izvleček

V kanadski provinci Quebec se od sedemdesetih let tega stoletja dalje vrstijo poskusi kanadskih državljanov francoskega kulturnega kroga — frankofonov, da bi po demokratski poti v provinci Quebec razglasili neodvisnost in državno suverenost. Dosedanja referendum sta bila neuspešna. Po rezultatu zadnjega sodeč, ko je le 0,8 % kanadski konfederaciji naklonjenih volilcev prekosilo glasove volilcev, ki so podprli idejo o samostojnosti, je v naslednjem tretjem poskusu, leta 2000, treba računati (tudi) s to opcijo. Avtor obravnava poselitvene, demografske, gospodarske, socialne, kulturne in politične razmere, ki govorijo za in proti quebeški državnosti.

Ključne besede: politična geografija, frankofoni, neodvisnost, Quebec, Kanada.

## 1. Introduction

Canada, with nearly thirty million people and one of the globe's wealthier countries, has been cited by the United Nations as the most desirable place to live in among the world's societies. It has a history of absorbing migrants from around the world

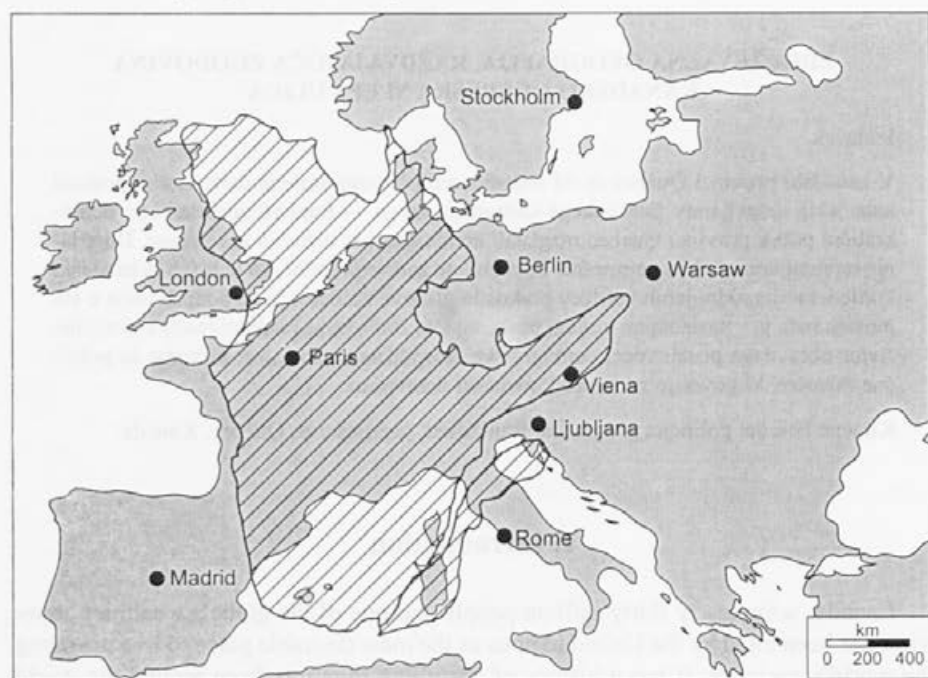
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who are drawn to a relatively harmonious environment. And it is still regarded as a haven for refugees who seek to live in security and peace. So, why does it appear from time to time in the media as a country under the threat of national disintegration? Why would one of its provinces, Quebec, wish to break away from this model of stability and prosperity? To answer these questions, we need to look beyond general appearances into history, politics and culture.

Quebec is geographically huge and most of it is sparsely inhabited. Sixty-eight times the size of Slovenia and three times the size of France (with one-eighth of its population), it lacks both country's transport links. Large areas of the north are left untracked by tarmac or even gravel highways. Roads, which form a complex network in the southern zone, thinly straggle north from the southern urban and farming lowlands before petering out into the Canadian Shield. Air transport is the primary means of connection between the south and the centre of Kuujuaq; in most of the rest of the north during long winters, snowmobiles are the principal way for Inuit, Cree, Naskapi and Montagnais to move over their territory.

*Fig.1: Quebec and Europe.*

*Slika 1: Razmerje: Quebec in Evropi.*



How can one give a sense of the immensity of this province, the largest in Canada? Figures are bald and not very evocative; Canada covers 9,221,016 square kms,

Quebec accounting for 1,356,797 of these<sup>1</sup>. In European equivalents, it extends from the North Sea south to the French Massif Central and the Adriatic and then east to the Baltic (see map). Most of this is inhabited by some thousands of native people and a wild life: bears, walrus, seals, caribou, moose, wolves. Native place names are more prominent here — Chibougamau, Waswanipi, Mistassini, Inukjuaq — although they share the terrain with some French and English names.

The bulk of Quebec's population is squeezed between the southern reaches of the Laurentian Shield and the northern slopes of America's Adirondack Mountains which command the New England landscape. It is highly urbanised, with nearly half of the seven million people living in the Greater Montreal region. Quebec, like the rest of Canada has most people living within 100 kilometres of the American border. The first colonists settled on the fertile lowlands along the north and south shores of the St Lawrence River and its tributaries as subsistence farmers, fishers and foresters. And their descendants, together with the later immigrant populations have mostly stayed within these bounds. Today they are concentrated in the cities and towns along the St Lawrence, most in the three hundred kilometres from Montreal eastward to Quebec City.

The portion along the St. Lawrence is but one stretch of what has been described as a natural economic region stretching west to Lake Ontario, Toronto, and the complex of cities, industries, commerce and agricultural activities of southern Ontario. The thousand kilometres of the St Lawrence lowlands account for more than sixty per cent of Canada's population, most of its industrial production and commerce and its densest network of communications and transport routes. Despite widening cultural and political divisions, the Ontario and Quebec economies are interlocked. Many of the reasons for this lie in Canadian and Quebec history.

## 2. Quebec history: a summary

The record of the francophone community over the centuries is one of struggle and adaptation to harsh physical conditions. It is a story of adjustment and resistance to the early political and social control of dominant institutions (French and British, colonialism and a dominant Church) which helped cement the sense of rural community solidarity over the generations. The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century French explorers were followed by church leaders and by the first colonists in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Known as the 'habitants', many came from Brittany and Normandy, to settle in their distinctive 'rangs' or 'long lots' on the lowlands of the St. Lawrence river. So was created a feudal society of 'paysans' and 'seigneurs'. For decades, these peasant communities engaged in farming, forestry and fur trading, paying taxes and produce to the land-

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<sup>1</sup> For comparison, France covers 547,000 square kms, Germany 353,000, Italy 301,000, the former Yugoslavia 256,000.

lords. Some became specialists, the legendary 'coureurs de bois', working for the fur trading companies and ranging over thousands of kilometres trading with indigenous communities. An elite, officials sent from France, members of religious orders and traders, formed the urban islands of Quebec City and Montreal in the rural sea of New France.

The European wars of the eighteenth century changed this scene. The 150-year feudal rule of colonial governors, seigneuries and church was rudely shattered by Anglo-French conflict and the defeat of the French in 1759. It was a crucial moment. Since then, the notion of two equal founding peoples, French and English, in Canada has been challenged by the former. For anglo-Canadian historians, it marks the first step towards the federation of two peoples; for many francophones, it symbolises conquest.

In the following centuries, the few early 'habitants' have grown into millions. Irish and Scottish catholic immigrants, especially, have added their names to the original 'pure laine' quebecois stock<sup>2</sup>, the French feudal landed nobility have long since gone and, more recently, the influence of the church has declined as the rural society has become urbanised, modernised and more outward-looking. But, for many in Quebec, the underlying objective of their history continues to be the search to free their nation from the structures imposed by defeat. The very motto of Quebec, "Je me souviens", may be seen as a memory of the time before conquest.

The collective memory also recalls the fear of cultural extinction reinforced by the defeat of the 1837 rebellion, a nationalist uprising by 'les patriotes'. It was severely suppressed, hundreds were killed and many more imprisoned or driven into exile. The 1839 British government's Durham Report is seen in English Canada as promoting representative government, but is construed in Quebec as another step in the colonial policy of assimilation. These events reinforced the differences for more than a century. English-speaking merchants and industrialists dominated the economic life of the province, established great fortunes from trade and cheap labour and built their mansions in the 'golden mile' of Montreal. 'Les habitants' remained in their familiar rural settlements, farming, fishing and firmly under the guidance of their church.

The 1867 Act of Confederation creating a single Canada is described by the Canadian historian, K. McNaught (1968, 1988) as an attempt at reconciliation between French and English Canadians. Yet, from the very first day, the interpretations of the agreement diverged. Toronto's "Globe" of 1 July 1867 spoke of "British America"; the Montreal paper "Minerve" described Quebec as "a nation within a nation". The Montreal writer, Hubert Guindon (1988) is clear as to whose vision won out. From the beginning, he argues, the unequal treatment of the two colonising peoples from

<sup>2</sup> The names O'Brien and Fraser, for example, are in their localities, as Quebecois as those of Pelletier, Lemieux or Tremblay and it is noteworthy that two prominent members of Rene Levesque's first *indépendantiste* Parti Quebecois cabinet in 1976 were named Robert Burns and Louis O'Neill. In the past thirty years, Quebec has had three premiers from different sides of the political spectrum, and from the same Johnson family.

Britain and France and the exclusion of French Canadians from any real part in building British North America was deliberately planned. It involved the industrialisation of Ontario and the economic subordination of the Quebecois in an 'unequal union'. The only real concession to Quebec in 1867, he contends, was the creation of a federal rather than a unitary state. The conquered were left merely to look after local culture, religion and law (Guindon, 1988, 106–07).

With Confederation, the Upper (anglo)Canadian heartland expanded, building a nation-state extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But Ottawa's drive to incorporate the West also caused new problems as politicians and corporations overrode the rights of western settlers and Metis (mixed race groups). The theme of central Canadian political and financial dominance has been an enduring one in Canadian history: Indians deprived of their buffalo hunting rights; Saskatchewan native lands threatened by the new railway; farmers' land claims not recognised; costly tariff policies to protect Ontario manufacturers imposed, along with excessive railway freight rates<sup>3</sup>. The Metis, under their Montreal-educated leader, Louis Riel, rose in revolt on the prairies in 1885. Differences between Quebec and Ottawa surfaced again with the defeat of the Metis and the execution of Riel. To the present day, this action epitomises the federal disregard of Quebec's pleas for clemency and, worse, the crushing of the dream of a French/English Canada and the francophone settlement of western Canada. It is seen as reinforcement of the legacy of conquest. In response, Quebec became, in the late nineteenth century, the stronghold for French Canadians, the guarantor of their language and their culture (McNaught, 1969, 1988, 177–180)<sup>4</sup>.

The province turned inward and drew language, culture and religion around itself in defence against foreign influence. The Catholic-Conservative party alliance of the late nineteenth century was, writes McNaught (1969, 1988, 160), based upon "the potent political ideology of French and Catholic survival". Sermons denounced modernism, atheistic liberalism and the doctrine separating church and state. In the 1920s, under Abbe Lionel Groulx, the Action Francaise movement carried the fight further,

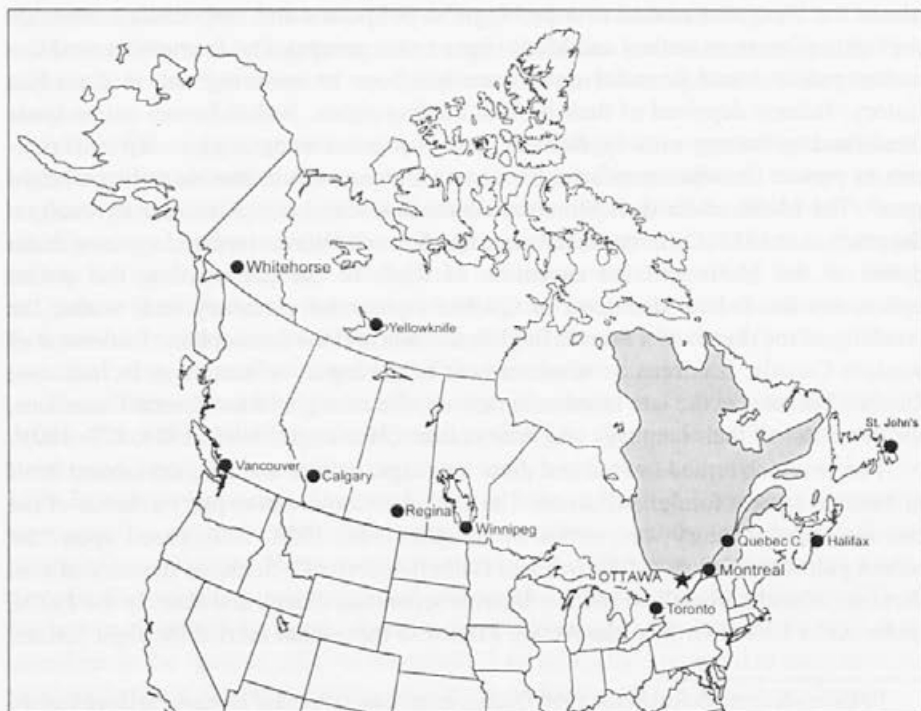
<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging defeat in the 1996 Quebec referendum, Premier Jacques Parizeau blamed the influence of the corporate and ethnic groups in Quebec. The outrage which followed concentrated upon the ethnic issue, but little has been said about the influence of the business sector. Yet populist movements against the dominance of Bay Street (Toronto's financial centre) and big business have arisen periodically throughout the past century of Canadian history and have helped to keep the federal-provincial differences on the boil. See also footnote 4.

<sup>4</sup> A 19<sup>th</sup> century Quebec political leader, Honore Mercier, called for provincial autonomy and equality with the Canadian central government. Here Quebec was not alone. Manitoba protested against the Canadian Pacific Railway monopoly and high freight charges, while Nova Scotia, deep in economic depression, was angry at the taxes raised to support manufacturers in central Canada. Resolutions were passed declaring provincial right of secession if the tariffs were not lowered (McNaught, 1969, 1988, 181). Conflicts were sharpened during this long period of late-19<sup>th</sup> century depression; social and economic problems often heighten regional and ethnic tensions. Quebec's current economic problems are an acute illustration of this.

lauding the simple and pure life of traditional rural Quebec against the modern urban influences promoting moral decadence. Harangues against city life, americanisation, Jewish immigrant influence, commercialism, ugliness and pollution, both physical and moral were linked by Groulx to moral degradation and the inexorable demise of French Canada (Trofimenkoff, 1979, 465).

Fig. 2: *Quebec and North America.*

Slika 2: *Quebec in Kanadska konfederacija.*



Thus, the breach continued into the twentieth century, with many francophones, committed to their 'pays' and sceptical of anglo-Canada's outward-looking modernism. Even so, Quebec continued to play federal politics with an astuteness which has seen four postwar Canadian Prime Ministers drawn from the province. Quebecois have, for example, supported the federalist Pierre Trudeau as Prime Minister of Canada and the sovereigntist Rene Levesque as provincial Premier. Only recently has this changed, with the separatist Parti Quebecois (P.Q.) and Bloc Quebecois in power at each level.

The 1960s marked a dramatic turn on two fronts. First, the new Liberal government of Jean Lesage introduced social and political changes so widesweeping that they have been termed 'la revolution tranquille' (the quiet revolution'). The objec-

tives were to modernise education, limit the church's influence, use the state's authority to nationalise major resources and utilities, and promote French Canadian aspirations with slogans such as "maitres chez nous" (masters in our own home):

*What characterises Quebec is that the development of the state's role is always accompanied by the affirmation of national sentiment. It was not just that the state was to be constructed; the people had to be freed and a country created. (Tardif and Lesage, 1989, 175) (translated).*

The state-directed 'quiet revolution' had broader consequences; nationalist sentiment now became associated with a growing francophone middle class initially located in government:

*The provincial state created new elites in the public and parapublic domains of health, education and welfare. The new middle classes that emerged as a consequence of this institution-building process are confined to the public sector (Guindon, 1988, 89–90).*

But modernisation also promoted local enterprise and capitalist entrepreneurs began to associate themselves with the nationalist cause. Economic interests merged with cultural and language issues to give nationalism a solidity and momentum it had previously lacked. When this business sector interest later allied with the sovereignist P. Q., the possibility of creating a new nation-state strengthened with the widened electoral appeal of separatism. But nationalism also took a more menacing turn in the 1960s. Growing separatist sentiment led to urban guerrilla action. Acts of physical violence, including bombing, by the Mouvement de Liberation Populaire culminated in the October 1970 crisis when the FLQ (Front de Liberation du Quebec), kidnapped a foreign diplomat and a Quebec politician, assassinating the latter. Opposing the capitalist system as much as Quebec's political subordination (Guindon, 1988), the FLQ won little sympathy from the middle class nationalists. Even so, many were incensed by the harsh response from Pierre Trudeau, Canadian Prime Minister; the War Measures Act was invoked, a state of emergency declared and sympathisers and 'terrorists' were imprisoned, many of them unjustly. The political consequences of this have remained to the present day.

### 3. Francophones and minorities in Quebec

Immigration has constantly changed the demographic face of Canada. Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, especially, are multi-ethnic cities. But here, again, there is a divergence between the vision of Quebec and the rest of the country over the federal strategy of multiculturalism. For many Quebecois, forming a collectivity is pivotal to

their sense of nationhood, so that immigrants should accept incorporation into the host society — a form of assimilation. The federal policy, however, allows for the expression of ethnic identity, permitting immigrants to form their own communities within the larger multicultural society.

The layers of difference and mutual incomprehension are endless, suggesting, perhaps, that Quebec opinion has become too obsessed by history while the rest of Canada suffers from historical amnesia. Whatever the case, history — and its conflicting interpretations — appears to have led the two sides to an impasse, each deafened by accusations from the other, yet baffled in the deep silence of mutual incomprehension. Other provinces evince little understanding of or sympathy for Quebec's claims while Quebec increasingly turns its political back on the rest of the country.

The shared indifference is illustrated in literary and popular culture. Quebec has rich and varied traditions in literature, film, music and drama, yet little penetrates the rest of Canada (apart from sport where the Montreal Canadians hockey team is nationally renowned). But films such as 'Le declin de l'empire americain' or 'Jesus de Montreal' are better known outside Canada, as are folk musicians, dramatists, novelists, entertainers, or popular singers. (The singer Celine Dion is an exception — doubtless because of her reputation in the United States.) And francophone culture is often only dimly recognised among many anglophones within Quebec. In the Quebec arts scene, the language of classical music is shared among a minority from both cultures who attend L'orchestre symphonique de Montreal. The other common area is that of international spectacles — the Jazz, Just for Laughs (*Juste pour rire*) and Film Festivals as well as the Montreal Formula 1 Grand Prix — all, ironically, dominated by foreign performers rather than local talent.

Quebec society is increasingly heterogeneous. The non-francophone population has been part of the province's history since the late eighteenth century; as a wealthy commercial elite for two centuries it played a commanding large role in the economy and culture of the society, a situation long resented by the subordinate majority. Again, however, there are layers of difference among the non-francophone groups. What was once an Anglo-Scottish merchant and middle class with an Irish immigrant working class, has now become infinitely more diverse. Gary Caldwell (1994, 21–22) distinguishes four traditional groups among the 'anglos' of Quebec — English, Scottish, American (the first being refugees from the American war of independence) and Jewish. Jews, in 1986, accounted for one-tenth of all Anglo-Quebeckers, those from Britain, Ireland and the Commonwealth represented half, another four-tenths came from Europe, the Caribbean and Asia. And all have quickly learned English as their maternal language.

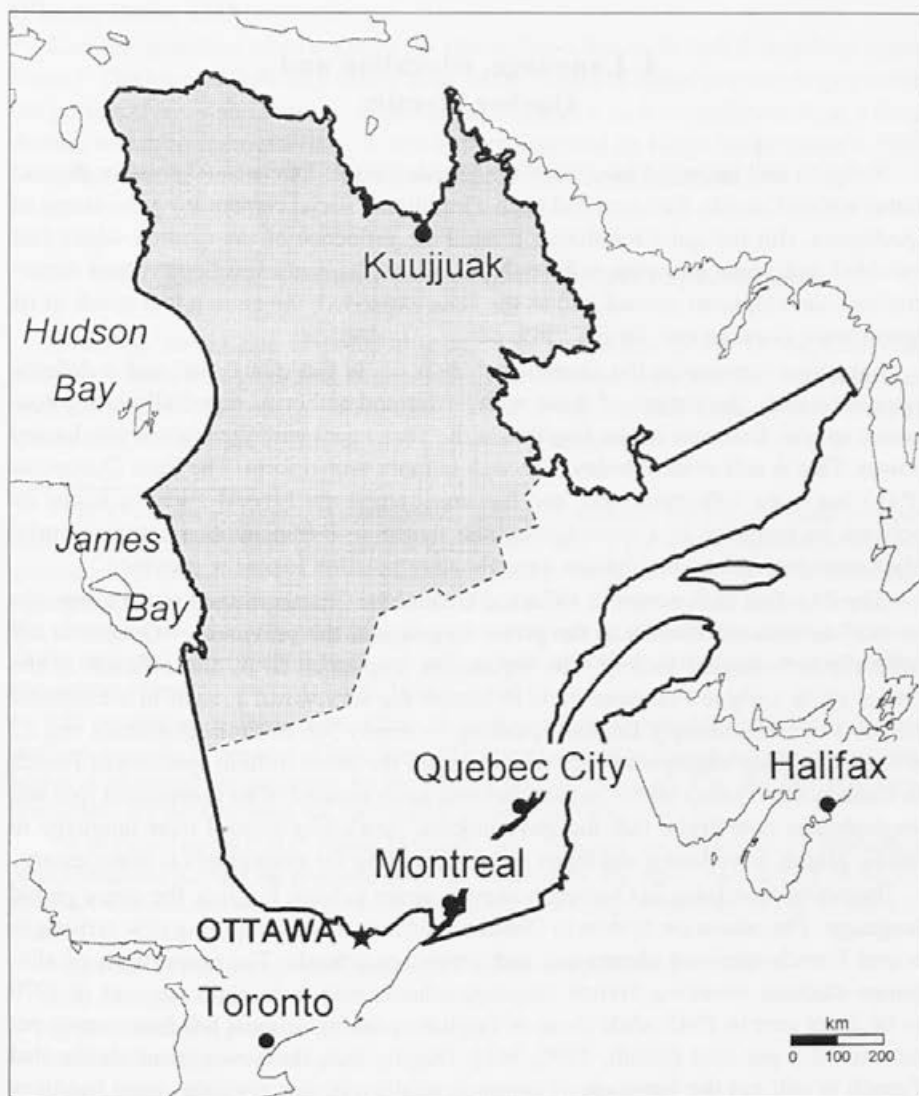
These groups forming the minority, unlike the francophone majority, have little in the way of a community culture or religion. Caldwell's makes the point that the presence of white anglo-saxon protestants (WASP) in Quebec is minimal: they account for just one-fifth of anglo-Quebeckers or half a percent of Quebec's population (Caldwell, 1994, 22). His conclusion is that it is not realistic to talk of an 'anglo community'



in Quebec because a grouping based purely upon a linguistic definition is not enough (Caldwell, 1994, 26). Moreover, this population is notably declining; in 1971 anglo-phones accounted for eleven per cent of the population, but by 1991, just 8.4 per cent (Caldwell, 1994, 24).

Fig. 3: Northern Quebec.

Slika 3: Ozemlje Inuitov in drugih indijanskih plemen v Severnem Quebecu.



With the 1995 referendum on independence and the promise by separatist Premier Lucien Bouchard of a third by the year 2000, the decline may well persist with a further exodus of the traditional anglophone population from Quebec. However, with continuing immigration, the proportion of those, especially in Montreal, who support the federalist option, may still rise. And, as Montreal is the preferred location for newcomers to Quebec, the political and cultural differences between the metropolis and the rest of the province will probably continue to grow.

#### 4. Language, education and Quebec identity

Religion and language have been the foundations of Quebec's claims for distinct status within Canada. Religion had been a traditional social cement for generations of Quebecois. But the quiet revolution diluted the influence of the Church which had moulded and given cohesion to French Canadians for centuries. Society was democratised, development ensued and as the state expanded, the church lost much of its prominence (Lesage and Tardif, 1989, 22).

Language remains as the clearest indicator of 'le fait quebecois' and a defence against English, the tongue of those with power and authority, especially in the economic sphere. Business spoke English, as did consumers with the highest purchasing power. This is still evident today, although in more muted form. The Parti Quebecois (P.Q.) has been influential here and has constrained the Liberal Party to adjust its policies on language to a more autonomist stance, as a francophone entrepreneurial class emerges, and as anglophone capital and population leave the province.

The P.Q. first took power in 1976 and created the Charter of the French Language in 1977 to entrench French as the prime language in the province — Quebec is not officially a bi-lingual society. The legislation, implemented by the officials of the Office de la Langue Francaise aims to ensure the survival of French in a continent which is overwhelmingly English-speaking — nearly 300 million Americans and 22 million Canadian anglophones are seen to engulf the seven million speakers of French in Canada. But French seems to have become more assured of its preeminent role and anglophones now argue that the governments' hawk-like control over language in public places, advertising and signs and in schooling for immigrants is unnecessary.

Immigrants arriving in Quebec, however, prefer to learn English, the major global language. The education system in Quebec confronts this by requiring new arrivals to attend French-speaking elementary and secondary schools. The proportions of allophone students attending French-language schools rose from eight per cent in 1970 to 66.2 per cent in 1987 while those in English-speaking schools fell from ninety per cent to 33.8 per cent (Small, 1995, 361). Despite this, the government claims that French is still not the language of common public use, nor even the usual language

of work, education, communications and business. This is supposedly true particularly of Montreal (O'Neill, 1996a, 1)<sup>5</sup>.

The situation, then, is complex; officials appear unbending and rigid to non-francophones and resentment is, at times, intense, especially as the anglophone population falls and schools (and hospitals) close down. Yet, the arguments for the protection of an island of North American French identity in an English-speaking ocean are felt deeply. In response, the language laws try to consolidate French as the language of public communications throughout the society (Comite interministeriel, cited in O'Neill, 1996a, 12).<sup>6</sup>

Can the positions of two camps be reconciled when both feel themselves under threat?<sup>7</sup> The biggest difficulty seems to lie in the failure of either to come to grips with the perspective — and fears — of the other. There is a lack of understanding, a deep divide, which is far from new; it was earlier captured in Hugh MacLennan's 1945 Canadian classic novel, "The Two Solitudes" ("Les Deux Solitudes")<sup>8</sup>.

## 5. Quebec, Canada and constitutional explorations

Since the emergence of political separatism in Quebec in the 1970s, Canadian politicians have striven to find answers to an unwelcome situation. But constitutional manoeuvres have deepened rather than narrowed the sense of distance which many Quebecois feel in their relations with Canadian federalism.

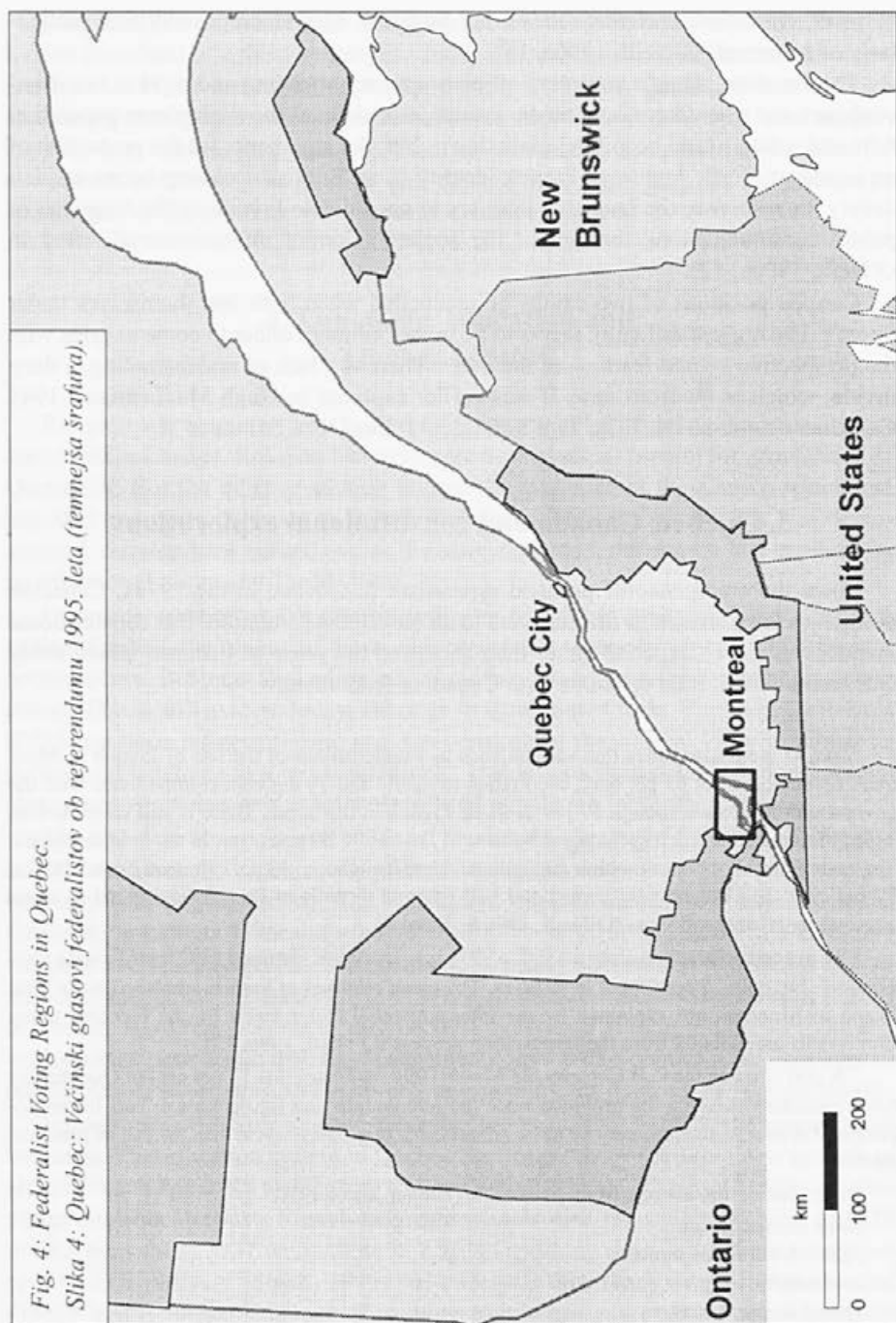
<sup>5</sup> Yet, O'Neill also notes that the statistics had underestimated the use of French in Montreal; 69 per cent, not 57 per cent, use French in public and 70 per cent communicate with the government in French, though 57 per cent use French in the home. There is still concern that, with immigration, French speaking at home will fall below fifty per cent in the next few years. Yet, among the allophones (neither anglophone nor francophone) 43 per cent read French books, 37 per cent read French newspapers and half respond to polls in French (compared to about one-quarter of anglophones) (O'Neill, 1996 b, 1 and 8).

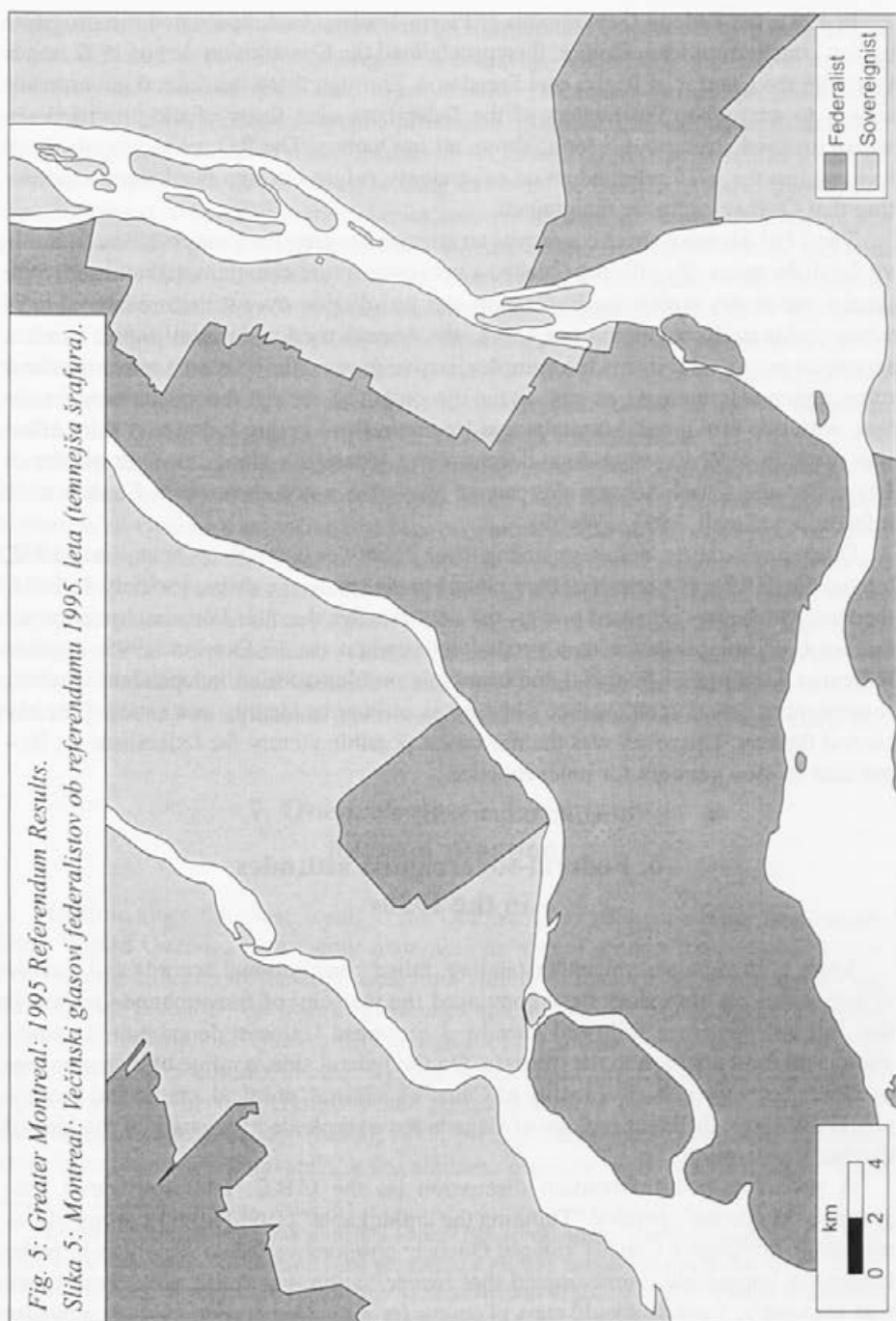
<sup>6</sup> 82 per cent of small businesses (50 to 99 employees) have obtained their 'certificat de francisation', but only 75 per cent of large firms. The lower numbers of French-speakers on the West Island of Montreal are explained by the interministerial committee's by the fact that many immigrants are isolated from the francisation process (O'Neill, 1996, 12).

<sup>7</sup> A poll cited on the C.B.C. News, 23 March 1996, indicates that 17 per cent of Quebecers have considered leaving the province since the referendum; the figure rises to half for anglophones. Of course, the poll may be more an indicator of anxiety levels than, as yet, of practical intent.

<sup>8</sup> Introducing his history, MacLennan cites Rainer Maria Rilke:

*Love consists in this,  
that two solitudes protect,  
and touch, and greet each other.*  
(MacLennan, 1945).





In 1981, the Federal Government of Pierre Trudeau first repatriated the 1867 Canadian constitution from Britain, then proclaimed the Constitution Act of 1982, together with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Through these the federal government sought to strengthen the powers of the federalism over those of the provinces — which aroused strong opposition, above all in Quebec. The P.Q. government which had just lost the 1980 referendum on sovereignty, refused to sign the document, insisting that Quebec rights be maintained.

The 1987 Meech Lake Accord was an attempt Progressive Conservatives to resolve the differences. By offering Quebec a veto over future constitutional amendments, greater autonomy within the Federation and jurisdiction over some ministerial activities traditionally belonging to Ottawa, the Accord tried to forestall future Quebec secession moves. But it was too complex; native groups, the women's movement and other regionalist interests, as well as the discontent of centrist federalists brought defeat, with two provinces, Manitoba and Newfoundland voting it down. A third effort was made in 1992 to reintroduce decentralised federalism along the lines of Meech Lake. But the Charlottetown Agreement was also voted down in a Canada-wide referendum (Small, 1995, 196–99).

Quebec separatists, despite rejecting these initiatives themselves, have, since 1992, treated the defeats as a rebuff of their claims to the status of a distinct society. In 1994, the Parti Quebecois regained power; the new premier, Jacques Parizeau, quickly put the issue of independence to a second referendum on 30 October 1995. Against federalist warnings of financial and economic problems for an independent Quebec, sovereignists called upon Quebec's history, its culture its identity as a nation. It nearly carried the day. The result was the narrowest possible victory for federalism by 50.4 per cent to 49.6 per cent for independence.

## 6. Federal-sovereignist attitudes in the 1990s

Years of dispute and misunderstanding, failed constitutional accords and a sense of impotence on both sides have convinced the majority of francophone Quebecois that full independence followed later by a European Union-style economic association is the best solution to the impasse. On the federal side, a range of disparate responses reflects the historical reality of Canada's cultural, political, ethnic and geographical diversity; different regions of Canada have responded variously to the idea of Quebec's separation.

A revealing post-referendum discussion on the C.B.C. television news programme 'Magazine', entitled "Thinking the unthinkable" (1996) asked a group of Canadians to envisage a Canada without Quebec; opinions varied so widely as to make consensus impossible. Some argued that reconciliation was futile, so a clean break was necessary; Canada should start planning for a post-separation country, refusing

to negotiate any form of association with an independent Quebec. Others thought that it was defeatist to talk of planning for a break-up. Underlying the debate was the question: will Canada itself hold together after secession? Would the crisis bring strength and allow a country, despite provincial differences, to call upon its heritage, its geography and sense of place, its shared values and reconstitute itself as a nation?

For many British Columbians, looking out over the Pacific to Asia, Quebec is a distant concern with only marginal relevance for its own economic dynamism. The province will develop with its trade heavily focussed on Asia and the Pacific and with an influx of Asian immigrants, many of them bringing in capital, with Chinese or Japanese rather than French as predominant second languages. Polls show that seven in ten of the population think that Quebec should leave, so that a long problem can be resolved and the new Canada can define itself — for British Columbia, along with other western provinces, still maintains a commitment to the idea of a Canadian nation-state which transcends provincial boundaries and interests.

But for the Maritime provinces, facing the Atlantic, with sluggish economies, outdated industries, unsaleable resources and small local markets, the stakes are much higher. With Quebec's secession, the four provinces would be physically cut off from Canada; would their ties remain with Canada? Would they consider links with the United States?<sup>9</sup> Or are there new forms of survival possible which could, for instance, encompass the creation of an Atlantic Union of some two million people? Again, the ambivalence in response was evident: perhaps, if the division of the country is planned for, the Maritimes would be better off without all the distracting attention paid to Quebec; yet, separation must be opposed — it would be treason to allow it.

## 7. Quebec's post-referendum internal situation

The time since the close result in the October 1995 referendum has been unsettling. Within Quebec, sovereignty maintains its appeal among francophone voters. But a strong minority of francophones, for a variety of reasons, remain federalist and the P.Q. has failed to win over anglophones and allophones. Here, Montreal stands apart from francophone Quebec City and most of the smaller towns and rural areas of the province. It is a multicultural city, one which replicates Canada's cultural development and is "the very context which personifies all of the contemporary contradictions of Canadian society" (Small, 1995, 24–25). These characteristics set Montreal apart from the sovereignty-seeking francophone majority in the rest of Quebec. Such

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<sup>9</sup> In the summer of 1995, my wife and I spent two weeks in the Maritime provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Everyone we spoke with was concerned about the future. Some felt that the Atlantic provinces are the 'most Canadian part of Canada'; the virtually unanimous response to the possibility of joining the United States was 'no way!'.

a situation is disconcerting for the leadership of the P.Q. and is the cause of occasional frustration when agitated politicians resort to ethnic reproaches<sup>10</sup>.

A number of regions in Quebec voted 'no' to separation — the island of Montreal (the largest population block), the Eastern Townships on the U.S. border (a traditionally anglophone and federalist area), the Ouatuais region (contiguous with Ottawa and the Ontario border) and the indigenous lands in the North of Quebec (which comprise the largest part of Quebec's land area) (see maps). The implications of the indigenous vote are especially troubling. The issue of land rights arouses a fierce intensity of feeling. In 1990, friction over the ownership of disputed land at Oka, near Montreal led to the raising of barricades and armed confrontation the Mohawk community and the Quebec police and Canadian army detachments. Here was a classical case in which the misconceptions over history, culture and values stand out starkly. Was the land to be treated as an ancestral symbol of the community or as a commercial commodity, to be bought, sold and 'developed'?

In the huge region of Northern Quebec as well, the native claim is that the indigenous people originally agreed to join Canada, not Quebec and that it was only in the early years of the twentieth century that their lands became part of the province by federal-provincial agreement. This insistence by native groups on their constitutional link to Canada has been reiterated by the Cree leadership and supported by the Federal Minister of Indian Affairs (C.B.C. News 13 February 1996).

In the South, some federalist groups have discussed their own secession, or partition, should Quebec secede, with 'non'-voting areas staying in Canada. They assume that most of Montreal, which contributed heavily to the 'no' side, would wish to withdraw from a secessionist Quebec. If this were correct, the new nation-state of Quebec would consist only of a narrow strip either side of the St. Lawrence river. Yet it is too simple. Many francophones who voted to remain in Canada would oppose partition. Given the choice, they would prefer to remain in the new Quebec despite their vote against it, rather than as a tiny minority in a restructured Canada. The enigmatic geography of nationalism contains deeply perplexing layers of meaning.

So far, we have concentrated on the divided history of different peoples within the Canadian confederation. But the narrative cannot remain simply as a survey of domestic discord. Canada, from its earliest existence, has been enmeshed as a primary staples trader in the world economy. Its colonial history and its contemporary reliance on overseas markets for raw materials and foreign investment have created an ongoing dependence on foreign decision-makers (Armstrong, 1988).

No study of the contemporary national struggle can overlook this salient fact and it can be argued that global changes are rendering much of Quebec's struggle for

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to ex-premier Jacques Parizeau's attribution of the referendum loss to ethnic votes, the current premier, Lucien Bouchard, in the course of his sovereignty campaign, called for Quebec's women to have more babies and increase the size of the white population. Another politician suggested that the votes of the young and Quebecois 'pure laine' should carry more weight.



sovereignty anachronistic. This does not mean that people's aspirations are invalid. They seek a society which more effectively reflects their national identity and which, in a more decentralised way, responds to their social, economic and political needs. It does suggest, though, that the terms of the present political debate may not be very realistic given the limits that globalisation is imposing on the capacities of nation-states to manage their own domestic affairs. How relevant are the demands for national sovereignty if the decisive levers of economic and financial power are largely deployed outside formal national frontiers? The following sections consider these issues.

## 8. Quebec — the economy, foreign influence and democracy

Quebec's export sector has performed quite well in the 1990s. Exports have grown rapidly and doubled in six years. At 28 per cent of gross domestic product, they are three times the rate of the United States figure and twice that of Japan (The Canadian figure is 36 per cent). Gains in productivity have been high and the economy has never been so open to the world (Gerard Berube (1996 a).

But growth in internal demand is constrained by high unemployment, still over nine per cent, and slow increases in consumer confidence and spending<sup>11</sup> (Berube, 1996 b, E3). Moreover, Quebec's export health depends on an unpredictable American market and on U.S. financial policy. Control over Quebec's economic future, then, is largely out of local hands. The external dependence is a double one, according to Francois Rocher (1993); it relies on both the Canadian (especially Ontario) and American markets.

Michel Chossudovsky (1995) argues that monetarist policies, high interest rates — largely decided by Wall Street and the large American and Canadian banks — and the cutbacks in public spending demanded by investors eviscerate the welfare state and increase unemployment. In Quebec, those on social assistance have increased by sixty per cent in five years. Budgets (as with those of Canada and other provinces) are subject to assessment by agencies such as Moody's and Standard and Poor's<sup>12</sup>. Ottawa's response to the austerity has been to reduce its commitments by cutting back federal transfers, but, ironically, this retreat may be sharpening anti-federal feeling not only in Quebec, but throughout Canada (Chossudovsky, 1995, 24).

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<sup>11</sup> Figures from a C.B.C. news report of 29 March 1996 indicate that Quebec remains the poorest province in Canada, with 1,450,000 people, twenty percent of the population, having to spend a disproportionately high part of their income on subsistence goods such as food and housing. Their circumstances can hardly improve with the proposed social cuts in the provincial budget.

<sup>12</sup> Standard and Poor will maintain Quebec's single 'A' credit rating — provided that the referendum issue is muted and government cutbacks in expenditures are deep enough (C.B.C. News, 3 July 1996). Whatever the merits of either policy, it is clear that a democratically-elected government must now be at least as responsive to the demands of powerful non-democratic (and in this case, foreign) agencies as to its own electorate.

Quebec, too, has adopted a neo-liberal policy, cutting back on social and cultural expenditures while forging its secessionist strategy. The result, remarks Chossudovsky, is politically paradoxical; the P.Q. vows to conserve Quebec culture, its language and its national identity while, at the same time, bowing to the pressures of foreign interests by decimating the cultural and education sectors. Chossudovsky's warning resonates with the counsel of Alain Touraine at a conference in Quebec in 1989. Touraine insisted that, to achieve independence, Quebec must seek to work within a social democratic framework, a Scandinavian form of democracy to lessen social inequalities, transcend the demands of vested interest groups and build upon the egalitarian heritage of community in Quebec society. (Touraine, 1989, 215).

### 9. Canada, NAFTA and national unity

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among Canada, the United States and Mexico is another reality to be considered in assessing Quebec's drive for independence. What will the attainment of sovereignty really mean for Quebec? How will secession affect the bargaining powers of the two severed parts of a former Canada within NAFTA — if, indeed, Quebec is accepted into the Agreement?

The Council of Canadians in Ottawa is a group highly sceptical of the strategy of global free trade. It criticises the attack on social welfare programmes following the signing of the NAFTA accords among Canada, Mexico and the United States; integration of the three economies, it argues, has forced Canada to lower its social standards:

*Since the FTA and NAFTA were signed, social programs have been savaged. The campaign waged by big business against social spending has been relentless. Immediately following the Canada-U.S. deal, the same corporate and political leaders who promised free trade would allow us to strengthen our social safety net, lobbied furiously for cuts, claiming Canada's social programs make us uncompetitive in the global economy (Barlow, 1996, 7).*

The areas cut include child benefits programmes; guaranteed income assistance; unemployment welfare (partly replaced in some provinces by punitive 'workfare'); public education (and the intrusion of 'corporate curricula' into the classroom); health care (the federal share of support dropping from half to less than a quarter, so forcing hospital closures). The impact on the unemployed has been severe, income disparities have grown, nearly four and a half million Canadians live below the poverty line and there are 50 per cent more children in poverty than prior to the FTA. Free trade has created a climate of pessimism and anxiety unmatched since the depression of the 1930s.

How much has this to do with secession and nationalism in Canada? By ceding much of its control over fiscal and monetary policy in the national economy to exter-

nal institutions, by shedding responsibility for social programmes and by creating a sense of dissatisfaction and insecurity among a wide spectrum of Canadians, the federal government undermines its credibility in the Canadian federation. As the crucial decision centres move beyond Canadian frontiers, so increase the levels of local discontent and dissent.

## 10. Thoughts on the future

Attempts to synthesise presents serious challenges; the situation is complex and the actors involved numerous. A majority of Quebec's francophone population aspires to independence alongside Canada; provincial status, even with recognition of their 'distinct' status is no longer sufficient. Past efforts by Canadian and Quebec politicians to negotiate a solution have failed so now the historical slate must be wiped clean and an independent start made on the basis of equality with Canada; sovereignty-association<sup>13</sup>.

But, there are domestic complications. Quebec society is a fabric of many threads of culture, values, allegiances and patterns of daily living. Many francophones still remain committed to a flexible federalism in a decentralised Canada. There are anglophones in Montreal who oppose the creation of a new Quebec nation-state in which, they fear, their culture, language, institutions and economic security will be eroded. They are part of a larger minority whose combined vote keeps Montreal and much of the west of Quebec culturally and politically distinct from the rest of the province.

Indeed, if those who have called for the partition of Quebec in the event of a vote for independence together with the autochthonous communities around Montreal and those occupying the vast territories in the north of Quebec were successful, the territory left to an independent Quebec would be close to the original lands of eighteenth century New France, along a narrow ribbon of land tracing the shores of the St. Lawrence river. This extreme scenario is unlikely for the capacity of both sides to continue negotiating is strong. But the prerequisite for such bargaining is, above all, that the positions of the other side not be demonised. This means that each must develop an understanding of, and respect for, the others' histories and cultural backgrounds and sense of identity.

Canada is a complicated country, a country of regions, of scores of ethnic communities scattered over thousands of miles. It is extroverted, looking out to the Atlantic and to the Pacific and it is deeply influenced by its powerful neighbour to the south. It is, in many ways, a fragile federation. In an age when the nation-state is under challenge from global change, the apparently stitched-together character of this country makes it especially vulnerable to pressures from within and without. What can be

<sup>13</sup> The declining demographic weight of Quebec within Canada may further encourage separatist feeling. In 1945, 31 per cent of Canadians throughout the Confederation were of French descent; by 1986 this was down to 26.7 per cent (McNaught, 1969, 1988, 329).

described as the 'historical accident' of Canada's existing frontiers is by no means immutable and could cede to other configurations — as a corporate proponent such as Kenichi Ohmae (1995) confidently predicts.

The future? It is only possible here to indicate some of the elements which are in play and suggest certain alternatives. First, in the event of a future 'yes' vote for sovereignty in Quebec, any attempt by separatists to remove Quebec from Canada will run into serious difficulties with the native groups and possible federal intervention to support the Inuit, Cree and others. The Inuit, in particular, could call for linking with other Inuit territories rather than with Quebec. Secondly, there would be confrontation with an unreconciled minority of anglophones and allophones within Quebec; the potential for conflict cannot be discounted in such a dispute. Third, the underlying reality is that Canada and Quebec enjoy little financial or commercial autonomy within the global economy. Their destinies are being shaped by a Washington-directed NAFTA and their financial decision-making is circumscribed by foreign banks, stock exchanges and lending agencies. So, what does the term 'independent nation-state' really signify here? Fourth, Quebec's separatist politicians claim to want full political and cultural sovereignty while fashioning a durable economic partnership with Canada within NAFTA. Resentment in the remainder of an amputated Canada, however, may prevent this from happening for some time and both sides would be weakened in their dealings with the outside world. Yet, fifth, the undeniable drive within Quebec for independence continues — spurred by social dissent and economic recession in the province — and this must be addressed in the rest of Canada. Logic and self-preservation argue for a renewed, decentralised form of confederation. Collaboration between the two partners on some economic issues, defence and foreign relations, sovereignty on political and cultural questions and negotiation on social matters could provide a more stable form of future confederal relationship: a recast sovereignty-association. It would create an economic partnership between two nations while allowing for greater cultural and political autonomy. A similarly dualistic solution has been suggested by Charles Taylor; two nations, one French, the other English, would comprise the new Canadian state. French Canadians would exercise greater autonomy within the nation of Quebec and would negotiate with the three or four regional groups making up the English part of Canada (Taylor, 1993, 147ff.)<sup>14</sup>

Quebec needs to recognise and actively accept the multiethnic character of its society. Immigrants continue to transform the ethnic and cultural makeup of Quebec — and, above all, of Montreal. A policy of assimilation is unlikely to win their support; recognition of difference — of cultural plurality — provides a more hopeful alternative in a society where minorities voice their concerns about social and institutional prejudice. And the need to resolve native concerns about land and cultural

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<sup>14</sup> The role of the indigenous communities is one which has to be taken into account, as part of this reconstruction. Their place as the original 'founding peoples' has too often been forgotten.

rights is one which faces not only Quebec but all provinces throughout Canada. In turn, Quebec's non-francophone communities need to accept that they are part of a larger francophone society and that there exists a history which gives the province a distinctive character and *raison d'être*. Acknowledgment by both sides of the qualities of the other, respect, tolerance — and, indeed, enjoyment of difference in a multicultural society — are the *sine qua non* for transcending the present impasse.

What could emerge is a looser, decentralised structure — a Canadian Union? Community? — with cultural and political acceptance of distinct identities. Canada might then be in a stronger position to deal with the challenges confronting it in a neo-liberal global system. But this requires a greater commitment to pluralism and empathy — a recognition of distinctiveness — which is still far from apparent. Canadian politics, though, have traditionally been pragmatic, based on compromise. Such flexibility may offer the fragile federation a way to endure.

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## Povzetek

V kanadski provinci Quebec se od sedemdesetih let tega stoletja dalje vrstijo poskusi kanadskih državljanov francoskega kulturnega kroga — frankofonov, da bi po demokratični poti v provinci Quebec razglasili neodvisnost in državno suverenost. Dosedanja referenduma sta bila neuspešna. Po rezultatu zadnjega sodeč, ko je le 0.8 % kanadski konfederaciji naklonjenih volilcev prekosilo glasove volilcev, ki so podprli idejo o samostojnosti, je v naslednjem tretjem poskusu, leta 2000, treba računati (tudi) s to opcijo. Avtor obravnava poselitvene, demografske, gospodarske, socialne, kulturne in politične razmere, ki govorijo za in proti quebeški državnosti.

Pri večini prebivalcev province Quebec je narodnostna identiteta v veliki meri povezana z avtohtonostjo jezika, katoliške vere in kulturnih navad, ki so jim jih posredovale starejše generacije. Te so zbežale pred represijami in lakoto v Bretaniji in Normandiji ter se zatele v takrat francosko kolonijo v Ameriki. Z vojaškim porazom leta 1758 je ta pripadla Angležem. Večinsko anglosaksonsko prebivalstvo Kanade ni kazalo razumevanja za pretežno podeželsko in na svoje simbole navezene sonarodnjake. Vlada Kanade je vsak poskus prebivalcev province, da bi si pridobili avtonomijo zatrla. Nacionalistična stranka Quebec-a PQ (Party Quebecois) je prav zaradi takega stališča centra pridobivala vedno več privrženecv.

Provincia Quebec pa ni vpeta le v zakonitostí ustave Kanade. Nasprotniki njene suverenosti niso le v Torontu, Britanski kolumbiji (ki zre na Pacifik in v Azijo), ali v Priatlantskih provincah (ki bi jih quebeška suverenosti prometno in prostorsko odrezala od matice), temveč tudi v pokrajini sami. Struktura prebivalstva in gospodarstva je tako kompleksna, da enoznačnega odgovora o prihodnji smiselni organiziranosti tega ozemlja ni mogoče posredovati. Indijanska plemena, predvsem Inuiti, zaupajo izključno le centralni vladi. Priseljenci različnih narodnosti se niso voljni asimilirati in prevzeti frankofonske simbole, temveč vztrajajo v ameriški identiteti, ki jo simbolizira angleški jezik in mešanica kanadsko-ameriške dediščine. Gospodarstvo je, po pred nekaj leti podpisanem dogovoru med Mehiko, ZDA in Kanado o prosti trgovini oziroma enotnem gospodarskem prostoru (NAFTA), usmerjeno na globalno, svetovno tržišče. Tuje multinacionalne družbe, predvsem pa finančne institucije kontrolirajo dobršen del quebeške in kanadske ekonomije. Kje je v sodobne svetu torej avtonomija nacionalne države?

Post-referendumsko obdobje karakterizirajo v Quebec-u nadaljne nacionalistične razprave, ki ogrevajo volilce za tretji referendum. Privrženci odcepitve niso voljni spoznati multietničnost lastne province (ki je, resnici na ljubo, taka zaradi številnih priselitev v zadnjem petdesetletnem obdobju) in dojeti povezovalni značaj geografskega položaja, ki ga dežela, ki je 68 krat večja od Slovenije, zavzema.