

The Plague of Nationalism Continues in the Quebec Referendum

A “Yes” Vote for Quebec or a “No” vote for Canada Affirmed the Nation State

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“Nationalism offers them something concrete, something that has been tried and tested and is known to work.”

—Fredy Perlman, *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*

On the corner of my block lies an empty lot. One day fifty trees, mainly conifers, each set into a metal container, appeared in the space.

I asked a man who was arranging benches what was going on. He explained that the lot had been rented for two months as an art concept. A stage was to be installed which could be used to perform or as a speakers’ platform by anyone who wished.

The idea, he enthused, was an ephemeral park, an urban park which appears and then, poof, disappears. Our brief conversation ended and I went away wary. The project was not without possibilities, perhaps, but for one thing, what about those trees? They looked pretty artificial ensconced in those containers.

As announced, a stage soon appeared. However, not much seemed to be going on whenever I passed by beyond the occasional person or two sitting on a bench. Then, one afternoon, I was awakened by music and speeches coming from the park. It was the beginning of “200 Names For a Yes,” a pro-independence initiative during the run-up to the Quebec referendum, 200 artists and intellectuals proclaiming their need for a Quebec state, five minutes each coming, Monday to Friday from noon to one.

The event was the brainchild of Francois Gourd, a 70s countercultural celebrity-cum-guru. Gourd had spotted the park and saw possibilities in it as a springboard for the nationalist racket.

I turned up at the event, distributing an abstentionist poster of mine and anti-nationalist tracts that I and another person had done. [1]

One day as I was coming home with groceries I noticed that the crowd in the park was a lot bigger than the usual 20 to 30.

Lucien Bouchard, the leader of the Bloc quebecois, a pro-independence party which sits in the federal parliament in Ottawa, had decided to pay a spontaneous visit to Ephemeral Park (as it became known). Bouchard is a charismatic demagogue with a flair for whipping up a crowd. After a yes vote, he was saying, divisions would disappear and Quebecers would be united. The man is clearly living in a fantasy world.

I headed back to my place, grabbed some tracts, returned and started to hand them out. I was quickly approached by the cops, who wanted to know what I was distributing. I was told that I could distribute material only after the event ended, and a cop positioned himself close to me to make sure I stayed put. Since people were coming up to ask for my tract. I was allowed to distribute it to those who requested it—as long as I didn’t move.

One intellectual type complained that my abstentionist literature objectively supported the no side. I explained that I was neither sovereigntist nor federalist (pro-Canada) but anti-state. Such alternatives, however, were beyond his dualistic mindset, and fortunately I was soon able to get him to buzz off. Another joker yelled that I was a “vendu a Trudeau” (a sellout to Trudeau). Talk about a time warp. Trudeau was Canada’s Prime Minister during the last referendum 15 years ago.

Bouchard’s speech ended. The crowd began to disperse. A woman, freaking out at the phrase, “Fuck the referendum” on my poster, tore it up. A man pushing a baby carriage said that if he wasn’t minding his baby, he’d knock my block off. Another man theatrically stuffed my tracts down a sewer hole, and then asked for my name and address. Sure thing, chump.

Articles about the “200 Names” event appeared in student and community newspapers and in the dailies. As word spread that it was the noontime place to be, sovereigntists in need of a nationalism fix flocked. Francois Gourde, the master of ceremonies, cajoled and worked the crowd. As referendum day approached and tensions built, the event often took on proportions of a (mini) mass hysteria.

The sound from the crowd and the p.a. system echoed down the block, penetrating into my room even with the windows closed. This caused an interesting effect because emotions and tones of voice were all I could make out, since most of the words were inaudible. Resentment, pride, anger, hope, joy. The word “oui” itself became a leitmotif, uttered exuberantly, almost orgasmically. Oui, oui, oui, oui, oui.

Sometimes I would stick my head out the window to catch a bit of what was being said. “The same cassette” as 15 years ago, as one former sovereigntist put it concerning present-day Yes-side discourse. I’d heard it all before: I was pro-sovereigntist in the seventies and voted yes in 1980 (the last time I voted, two years before I became a libertarian). An obsession with creating a Quebec state is deeply rooted here, particularly in the intellectual milieu. The “200 Names” event rapidly took its place in the vanguard of the spectacle, weaving comfortable illusions, sugar-coating the pill of the state, sucking people in. These artists have no influence over the policies of the Parti quebecois, the party presently in power, and will have none in an independent Quebec. “Useful idiots.”

Quebec Nationalism In Historical Perspective

In 1760, a British army defeated French troops and took control in Quebec. During the 1830s, a movement which was influenced by the French and American revolutions appeared. It objected to the toothlessness of the Quebec parliament and the fact that major decisions were made by appointees of the British Crown. Representatives of the Crown (sheriffs, justices of the peace) resigned or were driven out in some areas, creating zones no longer under British control. The rebellion ended when the British army intervened and crushed it following several military encounters with the insurgents.

From 1840 to 1960 an inward-looking conservative nationalism predominated. Reflecting the strong influence of the Catholic church, it emphasized defending the family, the nation, the church and the French language. In the 1930s a portion of the intelligentsia flirted with fascism. From the mid-1930s to 1960, the political landscape was dominated by the now-defunct Union Nationale party, a coalition of nationalists and religious conservatives. Though not a sovereigntist party, the Union Nationale wrested taxation powers away from the federal government, providing increased provincial financial autonomy.

During the ‘50s the federal government applied a Keynesian interventionist approach and set up the structures of a welfare state. This was opposed by the Union Nationale from a right-wing perspective (opposition to a welfare state) and from a nationalist one (opposition to federal encroachment on provincial domains such as health, education and social services, which were traditionally run by the Catholic church).

Urban Guerrilla Activity

In the early ‘60s an urban guerrilla group, the Front de Liberation du Québec (FLQ), erupted on the scene. Fueled by leftist anti-imperialist ideology, the FLQ viewed Quebec as a colony of Canada and advocated an independent

Quebec state. The organization carried out a series of bombings and actions which culminated in the 1970 kidnappings of a Liberal Party politician and the British Trade Commissioner based in Montreal (the former was executed and the latter set free). The federal government implemented the War Measures Act, placed soldiers in the streets of Montreal, and carried out mass arrests of sovereigntists, the vast majority of whom had nothing to do with the FLQ. During the crisis triggered by the kidnappings, the state was able to neutralize and eliminate the FLQ, and urban guerrilla activity in Quebec vanished, never to reappear.

In 1968, the Parti Québécois (PQ) appeared, marking the beginning of the modern mass sovereignty movement. In the words of PQ Vice-President Monique Simard, the purpose of the party is to “achieve sovereignty. Our party is a coalition of people united around this objective, even though, on a social and economic level, their outlooks may be different.” The party, therefore, is a united front which spans the spectrum from far left to far right. Although people with a conservative social agenda remain part of this mélange, the overall tenor of the movement is quite different from the Union Nationale of the 30s and 40s.

The influence of Catholicism plummeted as the churches emptied and many Quebecers turned virulently anti-clerical. A more liberal, at times counter-cultural mood replaced the social conservatism of the previous era. At the same time, the pendulum swung away from non-interventionism towards a belief that the state plays a key role in linguistic, cultural and other areas. The PQ officially rejected ethnic nationalism in favor of “territorial nationalism”. On a psychological level this meant discarding the identity “French Canadian” and taking on “Quebécois,” altering the relationship of identity with respect to the one million francophones outside Quebec and cementing the idea that identity and the Quebec state are synonymous.

However, territorial nationalism, which posits that one’s primary loyalty should be to the “Quebec nation,” proved dysfunctional: all non-francophone groups (18 percent of the population) voted massively against independence in both referendums. Thus, Quebec nationalism remains a de facto ethnic and francophone nationalism. This disconcerts the PQ, which would very much like to present independence as more than an ethnic nationalism to the international community. At the same time it is often the PQ itself which stokes ethnic nationalism to red-hot proportions.

The PQ took office for the first time in 1976. The party quickly passed Bill 101, which banned English on commercial signs, made French the official language of work, and obliged immigrant children to attend French schools, among other provisions. 15 percent of anglophones (whose first language is English) left the province, and those who remained learned French (as a general rule) and made sure their children learned it. Per capita incomes of francophones (whose first language is French) forged past those of anglophones.

In 1980, a referendum on sovereignty was held, which the federalist side won by 60 percent. The PQ was re-elected in 1981, but lost to the Liberals in 1985. In 1994, the PQ was voted back in on a platform of good government and a promise to hold a second referendum within a year. The referendum was delayed when polls showed the sovereignty option stuck at 40 to 44 percent.

Then, a 20,000-person mega-poll in which sovereignty scored only 40 percent threw the sovereigntists into a deep depression. At this point, the Bloc québécois intervened. In return for participating, it demanded that the referendum question be softened to include an offer of a political and economic partnership with Canada rather than a complete break. The PQ reluctantly agreed. This caused the Action démocratique party (a new organization founded by ex-Liberals) to jump on board, and the three parties formed a common front.

The No Campaign

The referendum kicked off at the beginning of October 1995 with the No side forging into an 8 to 10 point lead. “No to separation” signs appeared with the two parts of the word placed on opposite sides of the sign to give an impression of the traumatic, irrevocable nature of the option. The No side served up a number-crunching menu of gloom and doom, warning of soaring unemployment, higher interest rates, an increased deficit and difficulty in (re)joining NAFTA and NATO. It also claimed that the proposed partnership with Canada was unrealistic and that Quebecers would not be able to keep Canadian money and Canadian passports as the sovereigntists promised.

The Yes Campaign

Upbeat and feelgood, the Yes campaign offered a sharp contrast. Politicians soothingly assured that independence would be painless, despite what their own studies showed. In contrast to the monotonous separation signs, the Yes camp produced a profusion of brightly colored Oui signs with the o replaced by a daisy, a one dollar coin (to symbolize keeping Canadian money), a picture of North America without any borders(!), and a peace sign (!—the PQ backed the Gulf War and is itching to rejoin NATO). A “five minutes of racket” to support sovereignty took place, with people across Quebec banging pots and pans, honking horns, etc. “Spontaneous” demos, the wide use of stickers and graffiti—these and other methods increased visibility and infectiousness.

Yes-side literature advanced familiar reasons to vote for sovereignty:

* “To put an end to constitutional squabbling that has been costly financially and energy-wise in order to devote ourselves to building Quebec.” However, the proposed partnership with Canada following independence only promises further squabbling. After a Yes victory, unhappy No voters would be in a mood to squabble.

* “To recuperate the \$28 billion a year in taxes we send to the federal government and to decide for ourselves what to do with our money.” Obscured here is that it will be politicians and elites—the same people as now—who will do the deciding in an independent Quebec.

* “To affirm that we are a francophone people of America who take responsibility for and pride in our language and our culture.” “To integrate immigrants properly by giving them a desire to live in French.” It is clearly to be hoped, for a variety of reasons, that non-francophones in Quebec will learn French (hardly synonymous with to “live in French”). However, these statements indicate the dangerous tendency of every nationalism to assert the domination of one ethnic group over the others.

By mid-campaign the mood had shifted and the sovereigntists began to have the wind in their sails. A more aggressive approach was needed, however, it was felt, to push past the 50 percent mark. This took several forms.

First, the appointment of Lucien Bouchard as chief negotiator with Canada in the event of a Yes victory. This was an illustration of how a charismatic spokesperson, highlighted daily by the media, establishes a relationship through the spectacle whereby people live vicariously. They accord a power of representation to the spokesperson by relinquishing their own power. Populist, seemingly sincere, Bouchard played the emotional keyboard with virtuosity, pushing political hot buttons and stoking resentments. (Resentments which are based on a certain reality; until recently, the francophone majority was clearly discriminated against.)

Second, the Yes side executed a sharp populist feint to the left. The No side had been using business people at their rallies, a strategy that the Yes side attempted to make backfire. When a federalist businessman stated that the Yes side should be electorally “crushed” (rather than just defeated), and another implied that Quebec is too small to furnish the infrastructure to support his business (which makes subway cars and aerospace equipment), the Yes side took out full-page ads reproducing the quotes as proof that the federalist side wanted to humiliate Quebec. Stickers appeared showing Quebec being squished by a boot. Sovereigntist politicians took up the humiliation theme, painting the No side (half the population) as synonymous with big business. At the same time, the Yes camp was busy cultivating its own stable of business people and showing them off at a press conference.

Another aspect of this feint to the left was that sovereigntist leaders specifically positioned themselves as social democrats. Statements were made to the effect that this is what distinguishes Quebec from the rest of Canada. As previously pointed out, organized social democratic influence in the rest of Canada preceded its appearance in Quebec. “It is clear that the Parti quebecois government is not social democratic,” the secretary general of Quebec’s second largest trade union flatly affirms.

In addition, who knows what parties will exist in an independent Quebec, when the left/right popular front parties formed to achieve sovereignty will presumably no longer have a *raison d’être*. Not surprisingly, in a speech shortly after the referendum, Bouchard expressed his desire for a “rapprochement with the business community

that voted no.” And a statement by an anti-poverty group noted that “right after the victory of the No camp, the PQ’s first act was to sacrifice the province’s poor by announcing draconian budget cuts.”

A third method employed by the Yes camp was primarily psychological. Aimed at the 25 percent of soft nationalists, it focused on identity and was intended to resonate deep chords in its target audience. A Bloc quebecois deputy set out the underpinnings: “If, as I believe, Quebecers form a people, it is normal for them to give themselves a country.”

Therefore, if creating a state is normal, a francophone who remains unmoved by the proposition is not normal. Sovereignists express this accusation through a variety of metaphors: that one has not grown up, has remained a child or an adolescent, that one is spineless, on one’s knees, that one is a traitor. In this “vast enterprise of emotional blackmail,” as it is termed by Daniel Dubious, a critic of the Yes campaign, anyone who doesn’t get with the program becomes “a scumbag betraying his or her ancestors and future generations.”

Hitting a new, more strident note in this identity-oriented campaign was an ad by a nationalist organization claiming that without a Yes vote, Montreal would become less than 50 percent francophone. This theme and related ones concerning threats to the French language (always a sensitive issue -here) were then taken up by other spokespeople. It is certainly true that francophones in Quebec are a small group in a primarily English-speaking North American sea. The question of long-term survival is a legitimate one, although many francophones do not believe that French culture here is threatened now that Bill 101 is in place.

Often lost in these polemics about language and demography, however, are crucial questions: Which culture? Language...to do what? The debate is invariably framed in terms of preserving the status quo rather than in terms of radical change and thus is profoundly conservative.

The Abstention Campaign

To speak of an abstention campaign might be something of an exaggeration. A number of activities, however, did occur. People previously involved with the now-defunct La Sociale bookshop printed 1,500 copies of an attractive poster which read in part: “Neither Canada nor Quebec nor countries nor states; We’re not voting!” Teams postered the city, and persons unknown reproduced phrases from the poster and made stickers. Another unknown malcontent put up signs at Ephemeral Park. “Recycled Ideas, Recuperated Artists” read one, while another stated: “The Imagination Yields to the Nation-State.” Norman Nawrocki of Rhythm Activism recited an anti-politician poem at a referendum-theme poetry reading and I handed out tracts at the event. It is worth noting that not all self-proclaimed anarchists abstained or spoiled their ballots. One such person was even spotted covering up half a dozen abstention posters with ones announcing a show in which she was featured!

So intense is the siren song of independence that it is often hard for francophone anarchists to resist. Some contend, for example, that in tail-ending the nationalist movement, they can become the tail wagging the dog. The creation of an independent state in Quebec, they argue, would be a transitional phase toward...the abolition of the state. (“Independence thus becomes a stage in the march of peoples toward a classless, borderless planet,” states *Rebelles*, a Montreal magazine.)

By “integrating the elements of a revolutionary libertarian-socialist project,” the editorial continues, “we will be able to give independence the social context it presently lacks.” We are talking, don’t forget, about a handful of people here in relation to millions of sovereignists who have no intention of abolishing the state. Ultimately, these “libertarian-socialists” function as additional “useful idiots” for the nationalist politicians in power.

Native People

Separate referendums were held by Cree, Montagnais and Inuit native groups which inhabit the sparsely settled northern half of Quebec. “The message is clear: we will refuse the forcible inclusion of our people and traditional lands in an independent Quebec state,” said Montagnais spokesperson Guy Bellefleur, after his group voted 99 percent against sovereignty. The Cree and Inuit voted 96.3 percent and 95 percent respectively against independence.

The Final Days

In the final days before the referendum, emotions approached fever pitch. Sovereignists were euphoric at the prospect of winning, and fearful of the enormous psychological blow of a second defeat. Overconfident at the outset, federalists panicked now that polls showed the sovereignists within reach of victory.

On referendum night, a friend who took a long walk through the streets of Montreal related that the city appeared deserted: everyone was parked in front of their TV sets or watching in bars. This mass raptness was the first indication that the abstentionists were the big losers: a whopping 93.5 percent of Quebecers voted. The evening turned out to be an emotional rollercoaster, with the No side finally eeking out a 50.6 percent victory. In his concession speech, Premier Parizeau, in a venomous mood, blamed “money and ethnic votes” for the defeat.

This ugly statement has caused an enormous uproar, in part because it took place before hundreds of foreign journalists. Although many sovereignists distanced themselves from Parizeau’s remarks, others have defended him as a victim of PC excesses (their terminology). A positive feature of the controversy is that it has triggered a wide-ranging debate about the relationship between non-francophones and the sovereignty project.

Sprouted Like Mushrooms

But the overall effect of the referendum has been negative, leaving a deeply divided Quebec and resolving nothing, not that it could have. Since the referendum, extremist organizations have sprouted like mushrooms: anglo groups which want to partition Quebec in the event of a Yes vote, and a Francophone group calling for a “moratorium on immigration, and “an immediate end to promoting multiculturalism in any way in Quebec. Those who didn’t vote Yes, the group rants, are “enemies of the Quebec-people and, henceforth, we will treat them as such.”

Meanwhile, sovereignists plan to hold another referendum in a few years, if not earlier. With the banal independence project ensconced on the front burner, we’re in for tedious times in Quebec.

A proofreader’s comments: While the political climate here in Quebec is a far cry from that of the Balkans, and the Quebec nationalist movement is not fascist, three important ingredients of nationalism are present. Firstly, nationalist movements are led by and benefit the local bourgeoisie, who use race, language, religion, etc. to create divisions among the poor and the working class.

Secondly, to rally the poor and those concerned with social issues to their cause, the bourgeoisie often promises social change. Once in power, these promises are forgotten.

Thirdly, nationalism creates internal as well as external enemies (English-speaking Canadians and immigrants in this case). Quebecers, with French as their first language, who voted “No” are considered by most nationalists to be cowards or dupes at best, and at worst, enemies and traitors. —S.F.

Footnote

1. The abstentionist and anti-nationalist tracts are available from: Michael William, P.O. Box 1554, Postal Station “B”, Montreal: Quebec, Canada H3B 3L2.

fifth Estate

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