

CANADA: LOVE IT OR DON'T LEAVE IT!

The current federal approach to our constitutional dilemmas seems aptly paraphrased by this variant of the famous US bumper sticker. Plan A offers little in the way of real change. Plan B says Quebecers have no way out of a federation that refuses to accommodate their desire for change. Attitudes toward Quebecers seem to be hardening in the rest of the country, one symptom of which is a willingness to make intergovernmental deals without Quebec. All this suggests that for a time Quebec will have to tend to its own problems. By definition, however, local action on local problems cannot solve national problems.

La démarche actuelle du gouvernement fédéral en matière constitutionnelle semble bien résumée par cette variante de la célèbre vignette apposée sur les pare-chocs aux États-Unis. Le plan A offre peu de prise à un changement réel. Le plan B dit aux Québécois qu'ils ne peuvent quitter une fédération qui refuse d'accéder à leur désir de changement. L'attitude générale envers le Québec semble se durcir dans le reste du Canada et un des signes qui en atteste est la disposition à conclure des ententes intergouvernementales sans la participation du Québec. En clair, cela laisse entendre que pendant un certain temps, le Québec devra s'occuper de ses propres problèmes. Comme le veut toutefois la formule, agir localement sur les problèmes locaux ne peut régler les problèmes nationales.

Alain Noël

When I was a graduate student in the United States, in the mid-1980s, I first came across an instance of bumper-sticker philosophy that is very well-known but was then new to me. It said "America, love it or leave it!" At the time, I had no more than a bumper-sticker reaction to this exhortation. I felt ill at ease with the idea but did not give it much thought. I was uncomfortable, of course, because the message was aimed to some extent at immigrants and foreigners. More broadly, however, it concerned all Americans because it applied to politics a logic that belongs to the market, to counter the very possibility of democratic deliberation. "Voice," as Albert Hirschman so aptly put it, was denied in the name of an unlikely and necessarily painful possibility of "exit."

It dawned on me as I listened to the debate on clarifying the terms of a future referendum, that, in recent years, Canada has been busy reinventing this bumper-sticker philosophy. Canadianized, the exhortation becomes "Canada, love it or don't leave it!" It may take a few months before you see the sticker on a bumper near you, but it does not take much effort to recognize, here, the dual logic of Plan A and Plan B as it applies to Quebec.

In a remarkable article published in the last issue of *Globe, revue internationale d'études québécoises*, James Tully argues that Canada is not a free multinational society because it does not allow its members to seek changes to the constitutional rules of mutual recognition. The key, for Tully, is not to reach a definitive arrangement that would solve all problems, but rather to create a framework that allows a deliberation about rules and recognition that can never be completed or ended.

The issue is not recognition as such, but rather freedom. Quebec, in this perspective, is not free in Canada because constitutional amendments can be adopted without its consent, because it cannot in practice seek constitutional recognition, and because it would be bound, following a referendum, by constitutional rules it has not approved. Native peoples share a similar, perhaps even more difficult, situation. The choices are stark: You take Canada as it is and learn to love it (Plan A) or you accept that you cannot leave it (Plan B).

This is not simply a symbolic or abstract constitutional question. As Tully notes, debates about recognition also define power relations in a society. On a series of concrete questions, Canada now marches on as if Quebec did not exist or did not matter. The social union is a case in point.

I have written elsewhere on the Feb. 4, 1999, agreement on the social union and do not wish to dwell on specific aspects of the framework or on its implications for social policy. Three points must be emphasized, however. First, even though the agreement did not produce a constitutional or even a legal document, it was nevertheless a major departure because it brought the federal government and all the provinces except Quebec to accept a new set of intergovernmental rules in social policy. For the first time, the provinces recognized, indeed celebrated, the legitimacy of the federal spending power in social policy. This recognition, which strengthened federal leadership in social policy, was granted in exchange for a weak and limited constraint on the future use of the spending power, and it was accompanied by an affirmation of mobility and equality that tend-

ed to displace diversity and federalism as central values of Canadian federalism. Second, this agreement was perfectly in line with the priorities of post-1982 Canada. It further entrenched the majoritarian impulse to define a single, monochrome, Canadian identity, unencumbered by the difficulties of multiplicity and federalism. Third, the Feb. 4 agreement was, once again, obtained without the consent of the Quebec government. As with the constitution, Quebec will be bound by an agreement it did not demand and did not approve. More needs to be said on this last point.

In Saskatoon, in August 1998, the Quebec government joined a modified inter-provincial consensus, to participate fully in the ongoing federal-provincial discussion on the social union. To do so, the government made three important concessions: It left aside unsolved constitutional difficulties to join an ambitious inter-provincial bargaining process; it accepted much of the inter-provincial discourse on the social union; and it recognized implicitly a legitimate role for the federal government in social policy. In exchange, the other provinces agreed to include a strong opt-out formula in their common position.

The importance of Quebec's concessions has been underestimated by commentators, both in Quebec and in English-Canada. When the provinces turned around to accept, just a few days later, a framework that represented even less than their long-held pre-Saskatoon position, most concluded the Quebec government was responsible, because it never intended to reach an agreement. The fact that real concessions had already been made was not recognized. The fact, as well, that the provinces did not even come close to their own demands did not seem important. Is it worth adding that nothing was heard from all those "ordinary Canadians" who clamored, in the recent past, against 11 men bargaining the fate of the country in the secrecy of a closed room?

The domination described by James Tully extends well beyond constitutional politics. In the 1960s, the necessity of acknowledging and taking into account the demands of the Quebec government played a critical role in all federal-provincial negotiations. This imperative does not exist any more. Concessions made by the Quebec government are automatically deemed insincere and irrelevant. Even the views of Quebec's federalist official opposition are not worth

a worry. The rules, all rules, can be changed and applied to Quebec without its consent. In fact, it is not even necessary to acknowledge dissent. Quebecers, in any case, have nowhere to go. "Canada, love it or don't leave it!"

This approach is not simply federal or federal-provincial policy. The organization of the Mont-Tremblant conference on federalism demonstrated how respected Canadian scholars could happily contribute to setting up, in Quebec, a meeting so obviously and so intentionally beside the point. I was struck, also, by how enthusiastic, even cheerful, these colleagues and experts of Canadian federalism were to see an American president come to Quebec, and to Canada, to downgrade to a tribal impulse more than a hundred years of collective efforts to build a democratic and pluralist francophone society that could be recognized as distinct and legitimate by other Canadians. President Clinton overlooked what Samuel La Selva has called the moral foundations of Canadian federalism, the always difficult attempt to have

"both a common way of life and different ways of life," to see only "the most primitive human failing — the fear of the other," and Canadians, experts in Canadian federalism, approved and applauded.

For Quebec society, and eventually for Canada, this situation is corrosive. Federalists, inside and outside Quebec, are still fighting

the fight and they are tempted by the possibility of crushing the opponent, even if it means attacking Quebec society and Quebecers at the same time. In the last issue of *Politique et sociétés*, Maryse Potvin documents convincingly the rise of anti-Quebec racism in Canadian political discourse. Quebecers and their institutions are routinely denigrated, and it is now good political science to associate the search for recognition of Quebecers and of native peoples to the demands of all conceivable groups down to the "collectivity of socially malcontent anarchist poets" (as does Michael Lusztig in the September 1999 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*). Quebecers unhappy with the status quo, on the other hand, are tempted by a retreat from politics and from social responsibility, and by the same inclination to denigrate their own society. This dual tendency to reject Quebec society has concrete consequences. "National pride," writes American philosopher Richard Rorty, "is to countries



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what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement ... [J]ust as too little self-respect makes it difficult for a person to display moral courage, so insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely." Unable to "achieve their country," as Rorty puts it, Quebecers are not likely to engage in "imaginative and productive" political deliberation. As for Canadians, they are not much better off, with a large proportion of the country's population effectively disengaged from policy debates and with only one political party able to govern. Then again, this may be what many Canadians want.

Meanwhile, the world is changing. In the postwar years, the social and political institutions that emerged to define citizenship emphasized formal rights and redistribution. These institutions were not always conceived and produced by governments and were often decentralized or multi-layered. In Canada, for instance, numerous compromises were necessary, between the encompassing objectives of many and the reality of federalism. Still, universal patterns and "national" standards were privileged, often at the expense of diversity, difference and the federal principle. In recent years, changes associated with what German sociologist Ulrich Beck has called the second modernity, and the rise of new, more demanding, expectations have been calling into question the achievements of this period. In different ways, both the left and the right now pay more attention to difference and democracy, to the possibility for citizens to control the production as well as the distribution of social services. The issue, as Tully explains on a different level, is

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not simply rights and redistribution but also freedom. Obsessed by its unachieved, traditionally modern dream of sameness and universality, Canada is not up to this contemporary challenge. For now, authoritarianism seems to have more appeal than social and political renewal.

Quebecers have few options and limited means. Because much depends on innovations defined from below, by persons and social movements, there are still many possibilities. But the local cannot solve the national. And for this, there is no use counting on Canada. The response belongs to Quebecers alone. Together, they must reaffirm positive projects Quebec can pursue on its own, and work on a collective moral identity that is worth achieving.

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