

**“I never thought I could be as proud . . . “:**

## **The Trudeau-Levesque Debate**

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by Ramsay Cook

It is not the idea of *nation* that is retrograde; it is the idea that the nation must necessarily be sovereign.

-Pierre Elliott Trudeau, “New Treason of the Intellectuals,” *Federalism and the French Canadians* (Toronto, 1968)

What does this French Quebec want? Sometime during the next few years, the question will be answered. And there are growing possibilities that the answer could very well be-independence.

-Rene Levesque, “For an Independent Quebec,” *Foreign Affairs* (October 1976)

... only two positions seem logical to me: that of Mr Trudeau, who won the referendum of 1980, and that which preaches the independence of Quebec. The rest look like a kind of constitutional embroidery.

-Marcel Rioux, *Une Saison d la Renardiere* (Montreal, 1988) [translation]

MANY CANADIANS, AND doubtless foreigners too, found the Canadian constitutional debate of the 1970s something of a puzzle. Quite apart from the confusion created by arcane constitutional details best left to lawyers and other addicts, there was the dominant role played by two francophone Quebecers: Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Rene Levesque. If this was a Canadian drama, surely central casting had been mischievous in failing to assign one starring role to an English Canadian thespian. And the theatre analogy could be carried further: the particularly obtuse premier of Newfoundland, Brian Peckford, once described the debate as “The Rene and Pierre Show.” That suggested it was just a soap opera in which two middle-aged matinee idols made increasingly melodramatic gestures in a personal competition for the hearts of their sentimental viewers. Sunset Boulevard North. Or, if another simplifying analogy were needed, there was always sport. Now Levesque and Trudeau could become aspiring champions lurching round after round from corners marked “Quebec” and “Canada,” urged on by their seconds to deliver the final knock-out blow. Muhammad Alis in the federal-provincial ring. In the age of television, personality simplifies, ideas confuse. Or so we are told.

But reducing the debates of the 1970s to mere personality clashes, however dramatic, banishes confusion at the risk of introducing obfuscation. Trudeau and Levesque *were* powerful personalities and ambitious men. One had been a television star, the other an accomplished athlete. Each, doubtless, wanted to finish first in his chosen sport: politics. But each was also a politician with fixed conclusions on an issue that went to the very essence of the history and existence of the community in which they were both deeply rooted. Neither Trudeau nor Levesque created an issue that divided them: it existed before they came on the scene and lives after them. It can be simply stated: “All we need to know is this: is it in the

interests of French-speaking Canadians to be a majority in a pluralist Quebec state, or a minority in a pluralist Canadian state? That is what the whole debate is about.”

Those are Trudeau’s words, but Levesque could easily have uttered them. They agreed on the question; they disputed the answer. Yet both were champions of the community Trudeau called *francophones Canadiens*, though Levesque would have used the term “French Quebeckers.” The debate turned on that nuance. It measured the gap between the federalist and the nationalist and made it appropriate, though not necessary, that both gladiators should be francophone Quebeckers. But the nuance also created confusion for those who would have preferred a simpler dichotomy: French against English, Quebec against Canada. That Trudeau and Levesque were both francophone Quebeckers made that simplification impossible. The confusion can be dispelled only by examining the ideas they expounded.

As Canada’s Centennial celebrations drew to a close in 1967, two Quebec politicians published books setting out proposed courses for the future of Canada, French Canada and Quebec. *Le Federalisme et la Societe canadienne francaise* appeared just as Expo ‘67 was closing its doors on the Ile Ste-Helene in Montreal. Its author, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, was the federal minister of justice, a post which included responsibility for tending Canada’s Constitution. A politician of only two years’ experience, he was just beginning to develop a public profile. Long known among Quebec intellectuals-and by a few in English Canada-as a brilliant lawyer, political writer and one of the founders of the little magazine *Cite libre*, he seemed always out of step with the dominant views of his province’s leaders and, by 1967, increasingly so. In English Canada he was hardly known at all except as something of a nonconformist bachelor who had coined the aphorism that the state had no place in the bedrooms of the nation.

Trudeau’s book, a series of essays and documented polemics, had been written over a period stretching from 1957 to 1964. The essays were devoted to analyzing Canadian federalism and the place of French Canadians in that system. The focus was on Quebec. The earliest articles were critical of the centralizing tendencies of Ottawa and of those French Canadians-usually on the left-who supported that tendency. The later essays were sharp, even shrill, assaults on those French Quebeckers who, by the early 1960s, had taken up various versions of the slogan, *Quebec d’abord*. A book of this sort with chapter headings like “De libro, tributo ... et quibusdam aliis” and “Federalism, Nationalism and Reason,” was hardly, at least in normal times, expected to hit the bestseller list. But in fact the book, and the English version which appeared early in 1968, was soon on that list (though not all buyers were readers), and Trudeau was launched on a trajectory that would make him prime minister of Canada for over a decade and a half.

The author of the second book, this one entitled *Option Quebec*, whose sales in French and English were also brisk, was much better known both inside and outside Quebec. Rene Levesque, former journalist and television *vedette*, had joined Jean Lesage’s *equipe du tonnerre* in 1960 and played a leading part in launching the Quiet Revolution. As minister of natural resources, he had led a successful campaign in 1962 to bring the last eleven privately owned power companies into the publicly owned Hydro-Quebec. Later, as minister of family and social affairs, he had continued the building of the Quebec *Etat-providence*. But he also acquired the reputation of being a loose cannon on the deck of the Quebec ship of state. And as that ship heaved through the sometimes heavy waves aroused by fundamental reforms in education, the economy, labour laws, the civil service and social policy, Levesque became increasingly, if unsystematically, critical of the federal system. He also became more openly nationalist in his outlook and discovered that nationalist rhetoric was effective in mobilizing popular support for government measures. In 1963 he defined “nation” as “a group of men of the same cultural family with a place on the map,” and went on to

say that “nationalism” had to be used to overcome the “economic sickness” of Quebec. “The question,” he said, “is to use it as much as possible, because no one is ever sure of controlling it, no one can actually control this force.”<sup>4</sup> Hydro nationalization, in Levesque’s hands, was not merely an economic measure, rather it was a step toward French Quebecers becoming masters in their own house.

While Levesque’s frequent jabs at Ottawa and at the “Rhodesians of Westmount” (the English Canadian establishment in Quebec) made him something of a hero among French Canadians, especially with the student population where nationalism had witnessed a new birth, they also jarred English Canadian complacency. In 1963 he bluntly told an English Canadian television audience that “I am a Quebecker first, a French Canadian second ... and I really have... well, no sense at all of being a Canadian.”<sup>4</sup> His use of terms revealed a lot-being a “French Canadian” apparently meant being a French-speaking Quebecker, not a French-speaking Canadian. But those implications, and others, were only gradually becoming clear.

Levesque’s remarks-he rarely used prepared texts-were those of a man who, in contrast to the more academic approach of Pierre Trudeau, thought as he acted, or better, talked as he thought. As a radio and television journalist by trade, Levesque was more at home with the spoken word than the written word. (At one of their early meetings Trudeau, waiting for Levesque to finish a promised article for *Cite libre*, had snapped, “Say, Levesque, you talk damn well, but I’m beginning to wonder if you can write at all.” “Write ... write. . . ,” Levesque replied, “first I’ve got to have the time. . . .” And Trudeau shot back, “And something to say.”) Of course, Levesque would prove to have lots to say, but he reacted more than he analyzed. He was always a man of action, where Trudeau, at least until 1965, was an intellectual, one whose critics claimed was nothing but a dilettante in a Mercedes. Levesque’s book, *Option Quebec*, was characteristic: it was not really a book at all, but rather a compilation of newspaper articles, government documents, snippets of speeches written and spoken by a variety of people. Levesque’s *imprimatur* was on it, since he had led the group of former Liberals and bureaucrats out of Lesage’s Liberal party in the fall of 1967. He made the founding of the *mouvement souverainete-association* possible. He would be the leader of the Parti quebecois when it was established in 1968.

During the 1950s Trudeau and Levesque had become casual acquaintances. Levesque’s work and interests had concentrated on international affairs-his program *Point de mire* had brought the world’s events into hundreds of thousands of Quebec living rooms. Trudeau, whose wealth made permanent employment unnecessary and whose liberal views kept him out of regular academic life, concentrated his attention on Quebec, though foreign travel and international affairs also appealed to him. But Quebec politics and the trade union movement absorbed much of his time.

The events of the 1960s drew Levesque and Trudeau into closer touch. Trudeau was part of a small group of intellectuals who met fairly regularly with Levesque, now a minister, who used them as a sounding board for ideas he hoped to advance in Cabinet. Obviously, the two men were fascinated by each other, but each had reservations. In his marvellous memoir, *Les Annees d’impatience 1950-1960*, Gerard Pelletier provides a revealing glimpse of the two men. Trudeau, he writes, admired

Rene’s vitality, his lively intelligence, his aptly chosen words, his unexpected turns of thought, his imagination, the quirkiness of his learning, his extensive knowledge of history and astonishing memory for the smallest items of news-all this left Trudeau breathless.... I suspected him at the time of thinking privately that a journalist’s

background, combined with a star temperament, could only produce a tainted or at least dubious political philosophy.

As for Levesque, he

could not help having a deep respect for the other's intelligence.... Trudeau's political erudition clearly impressed him.... For Levesque, Trudeau embodied the scholar type, whose profound, authoritative knowledge he envied, but also the ivory tower intellectual, insensitive to certain realities, whose facetious brand of humour irritated him exceedingly.'

These attitudes, doubtless hardened and occasionally touched with anger, remained constant after Trudeau entered federal politics in 1965 intending to defend the federal system (Levesque, interestingly, had urged Jean Marchand not to go alone to Ottawa but to take his two "*copains*" with him) - and after Levesque moved to establish a political party whose goal was to destroy that system. At that point in 1968, Trudeau and Levesque agreed on at least two fundamental propositions. The first was that Quebec's future had to be settled democratically. Each man believed profoundly in the sovereignty of the people. Secondly, they agreed that the time of choice, individual and collective, was fast arriving. What that meant was that each had concluded that the fuzzy, rhetorical debates about Quebec's place in Canada that had consumed so much energy for the previous decade, were futile. The proposed panaceas-une *province pas comme les autres*, a particular status, a special status (today we call it "distinct society")-all missed the point. French Canadians would either be equal partners in a federal system that gave full guarantees to their rights throughout Canada or they would achieve equality through the establishment of a sovereign state. Special status, Trudeau and Levesque agreed, was neither fish nor fowl.

By 1968 Trudeau's option had been worked out systematically and tested in numerous intellectual jousts. The essence of his position was contained in a paragraph which formed part of a biting sarcastic attack on the early proponents of separatism. In "La Nouvelle Trahison des clerics," published in 1962, he declared:

The die is cast in Canada: there are two main ethnic and linguistic groups; each is too strongly and too deeply rooted in the past, too firmly bound to a mother culture, to be able to engulf the other. But if the two will collaborate at the hub of a truly pluralistic state, Canada will become the envied seat of a form of federalism that belongs to tomorrow's world. Better than the American melting pot, Canada could offer an example to all those new Asian and African states ... who must discover how to govern their polyethnic populations with proper regard for justice and liberty. What better reason for cold-shouldering the lure of annexation to the United States?

If Trudeau's option was intellectually elegant and idealistic, Levesque's option carried a powerful emotional resonance. His book began, "*Noun sommes des Quebecois*," and went on to explain:

What that means first and foremost-if need be, all that it means-is that we are attached to this one corner of the earth where we can be completely ourselves; this Quebec where we have the unmistakable feeling that here we can really be at home....

At the core of this personality is the fact that we speak French. Everything else depends on this essential element and follows from it or leads infallibly back to it."

Where Levesque had once described himself as a *Quebecker* and a *French Canadian*, the second designation had now disappeared: he was a *Quebecois*. Early in 1969 he told a reporter that “I’ve never had any feeling of being Canadian, but I’ve always had an incredibly strong sense of being North American. The place where I’m most at home outside Quebec is the United States.”“ Trudeau and Levesque differed not only about Canada; they felt quite differently about the United States.

The origins of Levesque’s nationalism and his gradual transition into an *independantiste* are difficult to trace in detail. Nor do his published memoirs help much. But like many young French Canadians, he was introduced to nationalist sentiments at school, and living side-by-side with the English in New Carlisle may have made him a ready subject. At seventeen he wrote in the student newspaper at the College des Jesuites in Quebec City that “French Canada will be what French Canadians deserve,”“ sentiments remarkably like those held by Pierre Trudeau. He learned some Canadian history, and like all Quebec nationalists came to see the Conquest of 1759 as both the source of Quebec’s inferiority and the historical event that needed undoing. In later years he recalled his admiration for Abbe Groulx’s novel, *L’Appel de la race*, the story of the break-up of a mixed marriage which symbolized Confederation.- But action, not theory, always attracted Levesque, and he drew his general conclusions from personal experience. As a journalist who had devoted most of his attention to international events, his mind was turned to Canadian affairs by a strike of French-language Radio-Canada producers in 1959. He joined that strike as a sympathizer and soon came to share the frustration of the producers at the failure of the federal government to step in and settle the dispute in the publicly owned network. Levesque concluded that nothing of the kind would have been allowed to happen in the English network. “Of such signal advantages,” he told the *Montreal Gazette*, “is the privilege of being French made up in this country. And even at the risk of being termed ‘horrid nationalists,’ we feel that at least once before the conflict is over, we have to make plain our deep appreciation of such an enviable place in the great bilingual, bicultural and fraternal Canadian sun.” Here was an expression of that minority sensitivity that would lead to the idea of independence.

Levesque’s years in the Lesage government made him increasingly impatient with what he believed to be the intransigence of the English-speaking business elite in Quebec and the rigidity of the Canadian federal system. In these years, when French Canadian representation at Ottawa under John Diefenbaker’s Conservatives and in the early Pearson years was ineffective, Levesque became convinced that Quebeckers were ready to run their own affairs. “Now that our new generations are bringing us more and more proficiency every year,” he observed in 1967, “there is no reason which can, which should prevent Quebec from realizing that thing that’s been kicking around in our collective back room for the last two hundred years, which is to get our chance to make our own way as a society.”“

The term which Levesque preferred to use to describe the option he chose by 1967 and which he would defend so ably and determinedly until his departure from office in 1985, was not “nationalist” or “separatist.” Even *independantiste*, though he used it, was less preferred than *souverainiste*. And that was important. Though Levesque never felt “Canadian,” he never proposed complete separation from English Canada. Instead, he favoured a continuing economic association within a structure where each “nation” would be equal, despite differences of size. He once called it “sovereignty-cum-association,” and that position revealed his moderation, even conservatism. For all his rhetoric about “colonialism” and “Westmount Rhodesians,” Levesque knew that Quebec and Quebeckers were neither oppressed in the

manner known in the colonial world, nor did Francophones hate Anglophones in any systematic way. As he wrote in 1976, “undoubtedly French Quebec was (and remains to this day) the least ill-treated of all colonies in the world.”<sup>16</sup> Hardly the language of a firebrand nationalist. Moreover, it should be added that Rene Levesque, for all of his suspicions of the Anglophone minority in Quebec, consistently defended that minority’s right to the use of its language, though not as an equal right with French. This was not always a popular view in his party.

The Levesque vision of Canada, if he can be said to have had one, was based on a view of what was convenient, necessary and practical. For him, that had to be a relationship between equal nations. In that vision Quebec was central, Quebec was first. In preparation for the 1980 referendum, the Parti quebecois issued a program whose title summed up the objective: *D’égale à égale*.

For Trudeau, too, Quebec was central. Though perhaps the most clear-headed defender of federalism in our history, Pierre Trudeau was French Canadian from Quebec. Before he entered politics, his writings were almost exclusively about Quebec. His goal was to help rid his province of the reactionary, paternalistic, nationalist regime of Maurice Duplessis, and the road to that goal, as he saw it, was to educate Quebecers in the values and uses of democracy. To those who cried “*Quebec d’abord!*,” he replied “*Democratie d’abord!*” His brilliant essay entitled “Some Obstacles to Democracy in Quebec” and the popular articles published in *Vrai* and collected later in *Les Cheminements de la politique* (1970) were passionate pleas for democratization and attacks on the nationalism which he thought stood in its way. For him, the checks and balances of federalism provided desirable guarantees for pluralism and freedom.

In his youth Pierre Trudeau may have been attracted to French Canadian nationalism. He campaigned in 1942 on behalf of a nationalist candidate named Jean Drapeau, who was an opponent of conscription for overseas service. And in 1944, at age twenty-four, after a long canoe trip in the Canadian North, he wrote a lyrical essay entitled “L’asceticisme en canot” (“Asceticism in a Canoe”), which concluded: “... I know a man who had never learned ‘nationalism’ in school, but who contracted this virtue when he felt the immensity of his country in his bones, and saw how great his country’s creators had been.”

This “nationalism” was not connected with ethnicity, but rather with a sense of place and pride in ancestral achievement. That perhaps explains why he altered the word to “patriotism” when it was translated into English a quarter of a century later.

If Rene Levesque’s political baptism during the 1959 Radio-Canada producers’ strike led him to a nationalist conclusion, Pierre Trudeau’s first association with the Quebec working class resulted in a quite different analysis. In the spring of 1949 Trudeau travelled to Thetford Mines with his friend, the labour journalist Gerard Pelletier. There he met Jean Marchand, the secretary-general of the Confederation des travailleurs catholiques du Canada, who was leading an illegal strike in the asbestos industry. Trudeau addressed the workers, joined the pickets and concluded that the union movement represented the best hope for the future of democracy in Quebec. In that strike he witnessed an alliance between an American-owned corporation and the nationalist government of Quebec, an alliance sanctioned by many of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church and which was devoted to crushing a French Canadian workers’ organization. This reactionary provincial government promoted a narrow ideology founded on “clericalism, agriculturalism and paternalism toward the workers,” an ideology utterly out of tune with the

dominant industrial order of Quebec. That ideology and the institutions which promoted it, Trudeau concluded, had to be undermined.

In the years after the asbestos strike, when Trudeau worked as a legal advisor to various union movements, his conviction that nationalism was a primary obstacle to French Canadian progress hardened into an unshakable conviction, one that he would never change. In his lengthy polemical introduction to a collection of essays entitled *La Greve de l'amiante*, he set out to dismantle traditional social and nationalist thought and to call upon his contemporaries to replace *a priori* nationalist idealism with a hard-headed empirical approach to Quebec's social realities. He concluded: "An entire generation is hesitating at the brink of commitment. May this book provide elements to enlighten its choice." Thus he was dubbed an "antinationalist" and, unlike some of his comrades in the fight against Duplessis who later found the "reform" nationalism of the 1960s appealing, Trudeau maintained that stance, and, if anything, intensified and clarified it in the battle against the so-called "new nationalism." In 1964 he and six other intellectuals-all younger than Trudeau-set out their answer to the "national question" which was once more consuming so much energy. In their "Manifeste pour une politique fonctionnelle," published in *Cite libre* and *The Canadian Forum*, they proclaimed:

In the present political context, what matters is to put the emphasis back on the individual, regardless of what his ethnicity, geography or religion happens to be. The social and political order must be founded primarily on the universal attributes of man, not on what makes him different. A set of political and social priorities based on the individual is totally incompatible with an order of priorities based on race, religion or nationality.

Thus by the time he chose to plunge into federal politics in 1965, he had become a fierce critic of nationalism-though he never denied the existence or value of nations. He had also become a proponent of Actonian ethnic pluralism as the soundest basis for a liberal democracy. By working to strengthen federal representation from Quebec in Ottawa, the balance could be restored to a situation in which Quebec, under Lesage's Liberals, appeared to be pulling itself, step by step, out of Confederation. Moreover, since he and his friends believed that nationalism in Quebec was the product of the failure of Canadian federalism to provide enough space for French Canadians to exercise their rights, that space would have to be made by reforming federalism, not by seceding from Canada. "The most effective way to cure nationalist alienation would probably be to put in a better kind of government," he explained to his somewhat unhappy readers of *Cite libre*. As Dorval Brunelle has put it so exactly, the goal was twofold: "against both French Canadian nationalism and passive federalism."

Separation, independence, sovereignty-all these, in Trudeau's view, meant the identification of state and nation, an inward-turning by French Canadians and, at least in the worst case scenarios implied in some of the early separatist writings, a return to the reactionary society of pre-1960. This was counter-revolution, a return to what he disdainfully called "the wigwam complex." Where Levesque accepted nationalism as a positive sentiment that could energize reform, Trudeau believed that nationalism based on ethnic homogeneity was negative, bound in the end to stifle reform. Actonian pluralism, a state in which ethnic distinctions balanced each other and were accepted as positive virtues, guarantees of liberty, was Trudeau's ideal; that stood at the heart of his political ideas, and the basis of his vision of Canada. And it was the point on which he and Rene Levesque differed irreconcilably.

Well before the *trois colombes*-the labour leader Jean Marchand, the journalist Gerard Pelletier and Trudeau-set off for Ottawa, Trudeau had set out explicitly the conditions that

were necessary if his gamble was to succeed. There were two conditions for successful federalism:

First, French Canadians must really want it; that is to say, they must abandon their role of oppressed nation and decide to participate boldly and intelligently in the Canadian experience.... The second condition is that the dice not be loaded against French Canadians in the "Confederation game." This means that if French Canadians abandon their concept of a national state, English Canadians must do the same. We must not find Toronto, or Fredericton, or above all, Ottawa exalting the *English* Canadian nation .. ."

Thirty months after his decision to join the Liberals—they were not sure they wanted him at first—and work in Ottawa, Pierre Trudeau was prime minister of Canada. At about that same time his old associate, Rene Levesque, no longer a Cabinet minister, began to build a new political party devoted to his ideas and his leadership. His ascent to power was almost as spectacular as that of Trudeau: on November 15, 1976, his party was elected on its third attempt. ("We're not a minor people," he told his joyous supporters that night, "we're maybe something like a great people.") The road to sovereignty-association had opened up. The stage was set for the final act in the great debate about Quebec's future and Canada's future. It would last six years, include the defeat and resurrection of Pierre Trudeau and then the referendum. On May 20, 1980, Quebec voters, by a sixty/forty split, rejected Levesque's request for permission to begin negotiations on the sovereignty-association question. Trudeau now moved to patriate the Canadian constitution, complete with a new charter of rights and freedoms and an amending formula. Levesque, on behalf of his province, rejected that constitution, demonstrating that the referendum had not ended the debate.

When Pierre Trudeau left office in 1984, he knew that while Levesque had lost, he himself had not won—at least not unconditionally. Speaking at Laval University in the spring of 1984 he once again defended his conception of Canadian federalism. In closing, he admitted that there was still much work to be done to harmonize the several "little homelands" with "the bigger homeland." He continued:

Our Canadian attachment will probably always be more distant, less deeply rooted in the soil than our attachments as Quebeckers, Newfoundlanders or Albertans. But, exactly for this reason, we must make sure our institutions can embody our collective will to live and instill it in the minds of all Canadians, and in the minds of foreigners wishing to do business and build a better world with us.

In 1962, Hubert Aquin, who would soon be recognized as one of Quebec's finest novelists, explained to his fellow Quebec nationalists that while hostility to English Canadians was at the root of the quest for independence, the English were not the essential problem. "It's the French Canadians we have to fight," he explained. That was a shrewd judgment. Indeed, it is the key to understanding the history of Quebec and of Canada between 1960 and 1980.

Pierre Trudeau and Rene Levesque: two Quebeckers devoted to the survival and full flowering of a modern French-speaking society. In Levesque's view that could be achieved only if his "minor people" became a "great people": sovereignty for Quebec. Trudeau believed that the future of his "little homeland" would best be guaranteed through participation in the "bigger homeland," a federal system built on equality between French- and English-speaking Canadians throughout Canada. For the *Francophone canadien*, Trudeau, Canada was central; for the Quebecois, Levesque, Canada was marginal—at best. Nevertheless, both leaders, Trudeau

and Levesque, were, in Gerard Bergeron's happy phrase, "our two-sided mirror"-both reflections of the same community."

On the evening of November 15, 1976, following the Parti quebecois's stunning victory in that day's election, Rene Levesque, in a state of barely controlled emotion, told his supporters: "I never thought I could be as proud to be a Quebecker as I am tonight."

On the evening of May 20, 1980, following the victory of the federalist option in the Quebec referendum, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, his reason only just controlling his passion, confessed: "I never thought I could be as proud to be a Quebecker and a Canadian as I am tonight ..."

The parallel was intentional; the summary perfect.