

A “Québécois Nation”? Harper Fuels an Important Debate

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The House of Commons voted on November 27 to support a Tory government motion that “the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada.” What does it mean? And why now?

The second question is easier to answer. The motion was triggered by an unexpected turn of events. Michael Ignatieff, in his quest for the Liberal leadership this fall, ignited a firestorm of protest within his party when he suggested that Quebec should be recognized as a “nation” in the Constitution. A similar proposal was endorsed by the federal party’s Quebec wing. It was promptly denounced by the other candidates and widely condemned as a “gaffe” in the English-Canadian media.

Fellow Liberal leadership contender Bob Rae voiced the widespread unease in ruling circles: “I’m not somebody who is going to set this country on a constitutional adventure, whose consequences and whose outcome I’m not certain of,” Rae said.

Rae was an architect of the ill-fated Charlottetown Accord, forged by the provincial premiers after the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord in the early 1990s. Neither of these proposed constitutional arrangements recognized Quebec as a nation. But Meech died in the face of English-Canadian opposition to a clause simply identifying Quebec as a “distinct society.”

Charlottetown was defeated in a pan-Canadian referendum in which Quebec voters rejected it because it failed to recognize the province’s national specificity, while voters in the rest of Canada (ROC) rejected it because they thought it did. Three years later, Quebec came within a hair’s breadth of voting for sovereignty.

Since then, no federal politician of any stature has dared broach the issue of reforming the Constitution to accommodate Quebec concerns.

Now there was an opening. The Bloc Québécois, seeing an opportunity to deepen the Liberal rift and embarrass the minority Harper government, proposed a parliamentary motion along the lines of the Ignatieff-Quebec Liberal position. Harper, to avoid the trap, and desperate to win more votes in Quebec, then proposed his own motion. Media reports indicate it was drafted in consultation with Opposition leaders including Stéphane Dion, then a candidate for the federal Liberal leadership. After some hesitation, the Bloc signed on, as did the NDP. The Liberals split on the vote.

The Quebec Liberals then abandoned their motion at the party’s convention, apparently in the belief that the parliamentary vote absolved them of the need for further debate – although, as we shall see, the Quebec issue proved decisive to the outcome of the

leadership contest.

If nothing else, the controversy was a further reminder of the political volatility of the unresolved question of Quebec's constitutional status.

For the Liberals in particular, Ignatieff's challenge was agonizing; he was implicitly questioning the entire legacy associated with Pierre Trudeau, whose career as prime minister was devoted to fighting Quebec nationhood and attempting to substitute for it a "Canadian" nationality in which distinct national differences were dissolved in a melting pot of English-French official bilingualism from coast to coast.

That conception had appeared to triumph in 1982 with the "patriation" of the Canadian constitution from Westminster. The deal dropped Quebec's de facto veto over constitutional amendments and imposed a Charter of Rights that overrode Quebec's language laws. But the unilateral 1982 deal was largely opposed in Quebec, where the National Assembly voted overwhelmingly to reject it. Ever since, successive governments have been trying to restore the legitimacy of the Canadian state among Quebecers, without much success. On one level, that is the goal of Harper's motion.

When is a "Québécois" not a Quebecer?

Does the recent resolution represent a turn in Canadian politics? That was certainly how it was treated in the mass media in English Canada and – more importantly – in Quebec. In the Canadian constitution, Quebec has no national status but is just one of 10 provinces, albeit one with a distinct legal system (the Civil Code). There is no recognition of a "Quebec nation" or "a Québécois people". While not a constitutional change, the parliamentary resolution does seem to say something never before officially acknowledged within the federal system: that there is a Quebec nation.

On its face, the Harper motion is analogous with recent moves by governments in Britain and Spain, for example, to recognize the historical reality of distinct nations within their territory. In this sense, it is a concession to the historic movement of the Québécois for equal status – linguistic, social, economic and political – as a French-speaking minority within Canada. Yet the motion also indicates a clear intent to limit the potential political consequences.

The wording itself suggests a clue to the government's intention. The original Bloc motion, which had identified the "Québécois" as a nation, referred to them in English as "Quebeckers". That is, a territorial concept, encompassing everyone who inhabits Quebec irrespective of first language or ethnic origin. This is now the common definition of "Québécois" in Quebec. Harper's motion, in contrast, used the term "Québécois" in both French and English versions, an ethnic connotation implying that only those whose first language is French qualified as a "nation."

The Tories, like many other MPs, seemed confused by the terminology. Le Devoir reporter Hélène Buzzetti asked Harper's Quebec lieutenant Lawrence Cannon if the reference to "Québécois" included all residents of Quebec "without regard to the boat on which their ancestors arrived?" Not really, the minister replied. It referred only to the "French Canadians" who happened to live in Quebec.

Buzzetti then asked if she was a Québécoise since her Italian ancestors had arrived in

America long after Champlain. She might be, Cannon replied, if she “felt” she was Québécoise. He added: “But I don’t think it’s a question of forcing someone who does not feel he is Québécois, who must necessarily be bound to that thing... There are some people who basically have opted for Canada.” What about the Quebec Anglophones, then, are they Québécois, the reporter persisted. “They can be,” said Cannon, whose Irish forebears settled in Quebec in 1795. “I consider myself to be Québécois.”

Cannon then accused the Bloc members of holding an ethnic “old stock” definition of Quebec. But Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe pointed out that in the Bloc’s view anyone who inhabits Quebec is a “Québécois”. It was the Tories, with their purely subjective definition, who were fostering “ethnic nationalism” – the same charge they and other federalists have levelled, unjustly, against Quebec nationalists such as Jacques Parizeau, the former Parti québécois leader.

That was the interpretation, as well, of many federalists. There is “no such thing as a Quebec nation”, protested columnist Lysiane Gagnon in the *Globe & Mail*. But there is a “French-Canadian nation” that includes French-speaking minorities outside Quebec, she said. And within Quebec, “French Canadian and Québécois are synonyms.” The Trudeau (and Chrétien) concept, in other words. Anglophones can’t be “Québécois.”

Michael Bliss, a “professor emeritus” writing in the *National Post*, was even more categorical. Nations are either ethnic, bound by “ties of blood”, or territorial, exercising political independence, he argued in an article entitled “Canada Under Attack”. Quebec is not independent, so its “nation” must be ethnic. “If Quebecers are a nation because they are of the French-Canadian tribe, the folk, as the Germans used to say, then we are legitimizing racial/ethnic concepts that are ugly almost beyond belief in the 21st century.” You get the drift? Today the nation, tomorrow the Reich. Let’s call it blissful ignorance.

Preparing for partition?

In fact, there is an ominous logic in the Harper resolution’s deliberate reference to a “Québécois,” not “Quebec” nation. It was noted by journalist Pierre Dubuc in *L’aut’journal*, a left sovereigntist newspaper.

“When Prime Minister Harper uses the term ‘Québécois’ rather than ‘Quebeckers’ in the English wording of his motion,” said Dubuc, he “wants to open the door to the partition of Quebec territory if the Yes wins in the next referendum.” Harper “is implying that he would recognize only the independence of a Quebec with a truncated territory”, the part inhabited by old-stock Francophone Quebecers. Dubuc pointed to Harper’s record on this question.

“Immediately after the 1995 referendum, Mr. Harper tabled a bill in the House of Commons stipulating that the federal government would hold its own referendum in Quebec on the same day as the Quebec government’s referendum. He even formulated a two-pronged question for the federal referendum... (a) Should Quebec separate from Canada and become an independent country without any special legal relationship to Canada – YES or NO? (b) if Quebec separates from Canada, should my municipality continue to be part of Canada – YES or NO?”

Harper is not the first politician to think of invoking the spectre of partition in the face of a pro-sovereignty vote, Dubuc noted. In his recent memoir, *The Way it Works: Inside Ottawa*, Eddie Goldenberg, Jean Chrétien’s closest advisor for some 30 years, writes that in the 1995

referendum Chrétien, then prime minister, wanted to make the partition of Quebec a central theme of the federal campaign, around the slogan “If Canada is divisible, so is Quebec.” The threat was dropped only because the Quebec Liberals, leaders of the No side, were opposed to it, according to Goldenberg.

After the referendum, Chrétien came up with “Plan B”. He recruited federalist convert Stéphane Dion as his intergovernmental affairs minister, asked the Supreme Court for a legal opinion on secession and enacted the Clarity Act. The Act arrogates to the federal government the power to refuse to negotiate Quebec sovereignty after a successful Yes vote if Parliament deems there is an insufficient majority around a clear question. Its prototype was Harper’s earlier private member’s bill.

Meanwhile, Ottawa continued to promote “Canadian unity” through such efforts as the sponsorship program and to fund groups partial to partition such as Alliance Quebec.

Quebec sovereignty supporters refer to the partitionist strategy as “the Irish solution” – a reference to England’s frustration of Irish independence in the 1920s through the separation from Eire of the Protestant Six Counties to form the Northern Ireland dependency of Westminster. Events in recent decades have revealed the disastrous repercussions of that “solution.”

A “nation” without the right to national self-determination?

Which brings us to the second half of the Harper motion: “... a nation within a united Canada”. One would think that if the “Québécois” are a nation within Canada, then surely they are a nation without Canada. Ah, but there’s the rub. Whoever says “nation” says... self-determination. The right of nations to self-determination has long been a fundamental concept of international law and diplomacy. It was first acknowledged more than a hundred years ago by the international workers and socialist movement; it entered the rhetoric of bourgeois discourse with the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. As a key ingredient of “Wilsonian” diplomacy, it was wielded by Washington as the United States sought to build its world order on the decline and ruin of the old European empires. And the right of nations to self-determination was the dominant principle in the wave of decolonization that swept the world in the aftermath of World War II.

Today, of course, it is Washington that is the prime offender against this right as it tramples the self-determination and independence of a majority of the world’s nations. But Canada can offer its own examples.

For dominant nations, “self-determination” is not an issue. But for minority, dominated nations, it is of central importance. Although this distinction is now rarely invoked in Canada in polite constitutional discourse, it is fundamental to an understanding of the Quebec reality. A nation whose collective identity is denied or inhibited by another nation is not free to determine its own future as a nation. Fueling the mass movement for Quebec independence, or “sovereignty”, is the growing perception among Québécois that the very existence of the federal regime blocks their ability to mount an effective defence of their language and culture and to develop fully as a nation that is master of its own fate.

The fundamental changes they want necessitate corresponding changes in Quebec’s constitutional status. And it is becoming clear to many, perhaps a majority, that whatever the legal and political relationship that an independent Quebec might subsequently

negotiate with what remains of Canada, Quebec must first declare and win its political independence. The hostility expressed in English Canada even to Harper's purely symbolic motion simply drives the point home.

Le Devoir correspondent Manon Cornellier expressed the impatience of even many Quebec federalists in a Nov. 29 column:

"When the Meech Lake Accord died, Quebec premier Robert Bourassa stated:

'English Canada must clearly understand that, whatever is said, whatever is done, Quebec is now and always will be a distinct society, free to secure its destiny and its development.' The motion adopted Monday night in Ottawa alters nothing. Nor did its absence for some years.

"The impediment to Quebec's ability to be the master of its own choices lies elsewhere. First, in the absence of limits to the federal spending power, a source of Ottawa's intrusions on provincial affairs. Second, in the refusal to grant the provinces the right to withdraw from federal programs in their spheres of jurisdiction, that is, a right of unconditional withdrawal accompanied by full financial compensation.

Finally, in the federal government's insistence that the fiscal imbalance will be resolved through increased cash transfers instead of transfers of tax points that it cannot take back. And of course, there is the refusal to resume constitutional discussions to get Quebec to adhere to the 1982 Constitution."

Recognition of the Québécois nation, Cornellier added, "to be meaningful, requires... fundamental changes that can again give Quebec the room for manoeuvre that has been eroded by Ottawa since the Second World War."

Even within the federal context, as many Quebecers have noted in recent years, recognition of Quebec as a distinct nation, not a province like the others, could help break the political logjam that so often is used to frustrate social reform in both Quebec and English Canada. Quebec's resistance to "national standards" set and enforced by Ottawa often serves to thwart demands for meaningful social programs in Canada. Allowing Quebec to choose and shape its own social programs as a nation could free the rest of Canada to develop its own reforms enforced by standards not applying to Quebec.

Was Harper's motion, then, the thin edge of the wedge, opening the way to further challenges of Quebec's constitutional status? And did it have political implications going beyond the purely constitutional aspect?

The morning after the parliamentary vote, an editorial in the Globe and Mail, a supporter of Harper's gesture (and of Dion's candidacy), cynically sought to minimize any such interpretations: "No one should think that because of the political gamesmanship in Ottawa culminating in yesterday's exercise, the government of Canada should take concrete measures to appease Quebec, or for that matter any party that might be offended by the resolution. This particular game is done. Canada woke up this morning still one nation, undivided." Q.E.D. (that which was to be demonstrated)

An issue that haunts us still . . .

One nation or two... or many? The refusal to address these questions frontally and clearly

has dogged Canadian discourse on the national question since the 1960s, when Quebec began to assert its distinct nationhood by developing its own programs in areas within its jurisdiction and gradually seeking greater powers within the federation. The NDP's founding convention in 1961 adopted the "two nation" thesis, only to abandon it soon afterward when its Quebec component insisted on forming an autonomous party in the province.

The Tories came close to a split over the issue and Diefenbaker's incorrigible insistence on "one Canada". The Liberals under Pearson initially adopted a conciliatory line, but then embraced Trudeau's hard-line resistance to Quebec nationalism. The ghosts of these past battles hovered over the Liberal leadership contest.

After he signalled support for recognizing Quebec's national existence in the Constitution, the front-runner Ignatieff's campaign lost momentum and soon stalled. As the other candidates manoeuvred to defeat him, the Quebec question emerged as the key to a winning alignment of forces. Gerard Kennedy and Stéphane Dion, rated third and fourth in delegate preferences going into the convention, agreed between them that the one with the lower vote on the first ballot would desist in favour of the other.

It was a logical alliance; Dion's record on Quebec was clear while Kennedy's rock-hard opposition to recognizing Quebec or Quebecers as a nation had already won him the support of Pierre Trudeau's son Justin and David Orchard, the latter a shrill "one-nation" Diefenbaker clone and prominent ex-Tory who reportedly mobilized at least 100 votes for Kennedy on the first ballot. When Dion's vote surged and Rae was defeated on the third ballot, the Chrétien forces who had been his mainstay rallied as one to Dion to deliver the knockout blow to Ignatieff. And thus "Canada's natural governing party" was delivered to Mr. Plan B himself.

Which is not to say that Dion is simply a Chrétien clone, let alone another Trudeau. He is on record as opposing Chrétien's refusal to negotiate the parental leaves issue with Quebec and has criticized Ottawa's Millenium Scholarship program, which intruded on Quebec's jurisdiction over education. In sharp contrast to both Trudeau and Chrétien, he has characterized Quebec's Law 101, the Charter of the French Language, as "a great Canadian law". He supported the Meech Lake constitutional agreement. And in his victory speech at the Liberal convention he called for a "federalism respectful of jurisdictions", a "type of phrase not heard from a Liberal leader since Pearson" says constitutional scholar Guy Laforest, a former academic colleague of Dion.

In the last analysis, however, the public debate sparked by Ignatieff and Harper underscores once again the extreme unwillingness of Canada's ruling class to accommodate Quebec's national aspirations within the federal regime. Whether Dion's leadership will help the federal Liberal party regain support they lost to the Tories in the last election remains to be seen. Likewise unclear is whether Harper's motion will win the Tories new support among "soft" nationalists in Quebec. Dion voted for Harper's motion, albeit "reluctantly", he says, so whatever the differences between them on this issue they are unlikely to figure prominently in English Canada in the next election. Both see the resolution as purely symbolic, yielding nothing of substance to Quebec.

Nation and citizenship

In its implicit distinction between "Quebec" and "Québécois," the Harper motion, whether consciously or not, impinges on a debate within Quebec itself over the definition of the

nation. The predominant view among most Quebecers, including many who do not support Quebec independence, is that the Quebec nation encompasses all the inhabitants of Quebec territory irrespective of ethnic origin or mother tongue.

This is the “civic nation,” a political concept of citizenship. It was embraced by the federal NDP when it adopted a resolution drafted by its Quebec supporters at its most recent convention, in September 2006.

“The national character of Québec,” it says, “is based primarily, but not exclusively, on:

i. a primarily Francophone society in which French is recognized as the language of work and the common public language; ii. a specific culture, unique in America, that is expressed by a sense of identity with and belonging to Quebec; iii. a specific history; iv. its own political, economic, cultural and social institutions, including government institutions and institutions in civil society.”

The resolution has some important flaws (see <http://www.socialistvoice.com/Soc-Voice/Soc-Voice-62.htm>). But what it says about Quebec’s national character is a useful starting point for discussions on this question within the party, the unions and the broader labour movement in English Canada. The NDP MPs supported both the Harper motion and a similar one by the Bloc that omitted the “united Canada” reference. The concept of the civic nation is explained at some length by Pierre Dubuc, in his article on the Harper motion cited earlier, although he does not use that terminology.

“Contrary to what is insinuated by Michael Bliss, the Quebec nation is not based on ties of blood. It includes, of course, the Tremblays, the Gagnons and the Pelletiers, but also the Curzis, the Braithwaites, the Ryans and the Mouranis. It is a historically constituted community tracing its origins to New France and having assimilated over the centuries people of various origins. These now constitute some 11% of the Quebec nation.

“A nation is not an ephemeral phenomenon, but rather the result of durable and regular relations resulting from common life from one generation to another on the same territory. This is expressed through a common language and culture, but also through a common economic life with its own institutions such as the Caisse de dépôt, the state-owned corporations, the Desjardins Movement and its trade union organizations.

“Nations do not live in isolation from each other. They are buffeted by history (wars, conquests) and migratory population flows. For these reasons, the presence of national or cultural minorities on the territory of a given nation is not unusual. In fact, it is the norm. Quebec is no exception, with its Anglophone minority and its minorities of immigrant origin (Greeks, Portuguese, Italians, Haitians, Arabs).

“In these normal contexts, the members of these communities assimilate to the dominant national group within a few generations. In Quebec, the process is longer because of the intense competition between the Francophone majority and the Anglophone minority to assimilate the Allophones [non-Francophone immigrants]. According to the Office de la langue française, the majority of language transfers (56%) are still toward the Anglophone minority, the spearhead of a continental Anglophone majority.

“Whatever their ethnic origin, whether they are Francophones, Anglophones or Allophones,

all inhabitants of Quebec share the same Quebec citizenship and have the same rights. They are all “Quebeckers”. It is the law of territory that applies.”

(Dubuc has expanded on these ideas in a provocative essay, “Sans Nous Qui est Québécois?”, available on line at <http://spqlibre.org/default.aspx?page=44&NewsId=68>)

Constituent assembly

Dubuc, like most Quebec nationalists, also makes a distinction between nation and citizenship. He defines a distinct “Francophone Québécois nation” within the broader “Quebec nation” of citizens, the latter including “the Aboriginal peoples, the Anglophone minority and the cultural minorities.”

“We should, at the earliest possible opportunity,” he says, “establish what their specific rights would be and how they will be protected in the future constitution of an independent Quebec.”

In fact, a means by which these and many other related issues of identity and rights can be resolved must be found if a clear and compelling majority of Quebecers are to be convinced that their national and social emancipation from oppression and exploitation entails winning political independence as a nation. The new party of the left, Québec solidaire (QS) puts the call for election of a Quebec constituent assembly to discuss and determine such issues democratically at the core of its approach to the national question. Dubuc doesn’t raise this; he is a member of the Parti québécois, which proposes to leave all questions about social content and political rights within a sovereign Quebec until after Quebec has become a sovereign country.

Even the concept of the “civic” or territorial nation may require clarification. In the mid-1980s the Quebec National Assembly, on a PQ motion, recognized a dozen or so aboriginal peoples as “distinct nations having their own identity and exercising their rights within Quebec.”

Québec solidaire goes further. It voted at its recent policy convention to recognize the right to self-determination of these aboriginal nations. At the same time, the delegates voted to table for further discussion a motion that a QS government would organize “equitable representation of ... the aboriginal peoples” in its proposed constituent assembly. François Saillant, a QS leader, pointed out that relations with Quebec’s indigenous peoples should be on a “nation to nation” basis. “We can’t be making decisions for them,” he said.

These and related issues of national identity and self-determination have been debated for years within Quebec. If nothing else, the Harper motion – insubstantial as it is – has helped to refocus attention on them in the rest of Canada.

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