

Canada's Glass House and Quebec's Charter Debate

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The worst aspect of the Quebec's Charter debate is the smug, self-righteous, paternalist, finger wagging of English Canada and the English media in Quebec. Canadians don't realize that they live in a glass house and throwing stones can be dangerous. Self-examination and self-criticism might show that English Canada is a major part of the problem.

Canada has consistently and unanimously refused to accommodate Quebec's reasonable demands for respect and recognition for more than 50 years now. Never once has it looked back and questioned its self-appointed moral superiority. For instance, it did not hesitate to promote and then lionize its chosen French Canadian leader and send him into the fray to do the dirty work, which has included proclaiming War Measures in time of peace to lock up hundreds of singers, trade unionists, artists, and ordinary political activists and sending in the army to occupy Quebec. Using dupery, duplicity and the same French-Canadian front man, Canada adopted the country's fundamental law, the 1982 Constitution, against the will of Quebec's National Assembly, which has consistently expressed its steadfast opposition to that constitution for the past 30 years. Attempts to right that wrong (i.e., Meech Accord) were fought tooth and nail by most of Canada's political class.

And when force and dupery have not been used, the people who run Canada have never questioned their practice of "buying Quebec off"—they are "past masters at it" said the late great Jane Jacobs.

The unity of Canada's rulers towards Quebec allowed the government of Canada and Canadian corporations to blithely violate Quebec's democratically adopted referendum and election laws in the 1995 referendum. Millions of dollars were poured illegally into Quebec to mobilize and intimidate Quebecers. The worst jingoism, "My country right or wrong," has always prevailed in Canada when it comes to Quebec. That was also the case with the Clarity Act, which received unanimous support from English Canada's MPs. Fortunately the Bloc Québécois voted against it.

Never has Canada's political class had the slightest qualms about using the ugly and base politics of divide and rule, such as brazenly mobilizing minority and immigrant communities and First Nations in an aim to discredit and tar the even the most noble of Quebec's efforts to build a cohesive, prosperous, and successful nation that could very well cooperate closely with Canada, just as Norway voted to be free from Sweden in 1905.

Canadians then get up on their high horses and boast, "We are multicultural, we are welcome others, not like the racists in Quebec." Yet how many realize that Canada's multicultural policy was brought in not as an act of generosity to minority and immigrant communities, but to contain Quebec? Adopted on October 8, 1971 on the heels of the 1970 War Measures, Canada's Multicultural Act was Trudeau's answer to the report of a major

Royal Commission created to solve the Quebec crisis: that report recommended a bi-lingual and bi-cultural Canada. Trudeau answered with bilingualism but multiculturalism, which effectively relegated Quebec to the same status as the Ukrainians in Manitoba or the Italian community in Toronto. That is why Quebec opposes Canadian multiculturalism.

Never has Canada looked back. Unlike Quebec where, for better or for worse, questions are debated openly, Canada is happy to control debate, to smile and forget its past sins, to smugly pat itself on its back, usually comforting itself by saying: look at Quebec, they're all racists and they don't know it. (Though few in Canada want to know it, Quebec was the first place in the British Empire to grant equal rights to Jews (1832); the mayors of two cities in Northern Quebec (Mont-Laurier and Amos), where the communities of African origin are negligible, have consistently elected black mayors born in Haiti; Quebec's Minister of Culture was born and raised in Cameroon; the list goes on.)

Now about this Charter debate. Considering how for the past 50 years Canada has contained Quebec and doused its most profound aspirations using means and methods that arise out of the same mindset that has erected walls and barbed-wire fences and deployed arms elsewhere, is it surprising that debate has now been reduced to one about identity and not about Quebec's political status with regards to Canada?

Most people in Canada and Quebec will agree on many points in the proposed Charter. Who for instance opposes the separation of Church and State, (other than a few religious zealots in Stephen Harper's entourage)? The one issue that is being hotly debated is that of religious symbols worn while in the employment of the public sector, and more specifically in schools, hospitals and daycares. Quebecers are divided on the issue, as are sovereigntists, including members of the governing party. Please let us debate it freely.

If English-speaking Canadians really care about the people who might eventually be affected by the Charter, here's a modest proposal. Why not first look at the situation of minorities in Canada's own back yard—and while at it, that of First Nations? There is surely room for improvement.

And then most importantly, how about some self-examination. Why not examine how Canadians and their political representatives in Ottawa and in provincial legislatures have dealt with Quebec's very legitimate demands over the past 50 years? Have English Canadians, the favourite media, and the politicians participated in the never-ending campaigns to discredit Quebec using the basest arguments that have no grounding in fact? Have they participated in the illegal campaign during the 1995 referendum conveniently misnamed "The Quebec Love-In?"

Has anybody defended Quebec's right to self-determination?

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