

QUEBEC SOCIAL CHANGE: A book review

This essay will analyse the social and political change in Quebec through the eyes of Kenneth McRoberts.

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In, Quebec Social Change And Political Crisis by, Kenneth McRoberts revolves around central themes such as religion, class struggle, and the struggle for power. The historical significant roots to Quebec's present day struggles dates back to the French Revolution. Religion's strong hold on people as it occurred in the earlier centuries was lost in the French Revolution before much of the Industrialization periods. But in Quebec's catholic religion hold was strengthened because the British were left in firm control immediately following their conquest. In essence, as Kenneth McRoberts mentions the British conquest saved religion from the faith that it had suffered during the French revolution. The result, 150 years later, was that the Quebecois were still ruled by religion under The Duplessis Regime. This is crucial in understanding why Quebecers are backward when it comes to business. Religion opposed French participation in business, as mentioned by Kenneth McRoberts, which narrowed the chance for the French to enter the business world. The periods of industrialization advanced society at such a rapid pace that the gap between the predominately business class, the English, and the lower classes grew to a point where only "The Quiet Revolution" could ensure French Canadians a place into the business world.

The French learned that they could influence the English by way of numbers, which lead then to turn to politics. Therefore the "responsible government" era emerged as struggle between the English and the French as Kenneth McRoberts mentions. In reality the struggle was not between English and French per say but between; farmers demands for roads and taxes on the rich and business demands for docks and taxes on the poor. That is to say businessmen were labelled English because of their majority and the farmers were labelled as French because of their rural society and agrarian way of life in early stages of history. Therefore, when the manufacturing age arrived the French found themselves forced to abandon their agrarian way of life and took up jobs in factories doing physical labour. Furthermore these French Canadians where dominated by the upper positioned English, not

because they were English but because they were established for many years before the French Canadians arrived in the business scene.

Economic development in Quebec, before the Duplessis regime, was discouraged because business was associated with English culture. The English conquest saved religion from the faith that it had suffered under the French Revolution. Religion was primarily concerned with increasing the number of followers, which gave religion more power and succeeded by enforcing the family. That is to say that they used their religious influence to force French Canadian mothers to have lots of children.

The churches argument against business was that it was seen as a part of English culture therefore the French Canadians rejected business to save their own culture. The church regarded urban life as one that could influence French Canadians so religion discouraged urbanization and encouraged rural life. French Canadians saw a constant flow of immigrants to the cities and saw the process of assimilation at work. As Kenneth McRoberts puts it "immigrants showed French Canadians that Montreal was the locus of assimilation". Therefore immigrants only reinforced what religious leaders were telling French Canadians. However in the sixties, economic development did occur through the exploitation of Quebec's raw materials. This however was only possible after religious domination over the French Canadian ended. This economic development was essentially The Quiet Revolution, a period of "rattrapage".

In Sum, economic development reached its zenith in the sixties under The Quiet Revolution primarily because Religious dominance ended. The revolution was in no way radical but instead was just a period of "rattrapage". Quebec was catching up with the rest of the world that was 150 years ahead in terms of business.

The Duplessis Regime was an era that pushed the French Canadians backward to the point where the anger and frustration to this day are still felt against the church. There was no state intervention at all on the part of Duplessis, which Kenneth McRoberts points out. Duplessis opposed unions and failed to make decision-making roles. Duplessis had full support of the clergy because they had his full financial attention. The corporations also rubbed shoulders with him because they promised no intervention in governmental affairs if he promised to regulate unions. He also had control over the educative system which gave him the option to teach what would less influence the French Canadians against him. He focused education on Medicine, law and theology. The result was a constant struggle between religious ideals and economic development.

Economically unions were for state intervention because in the long run benefits would result in jobs for their members. The expansion that was occurring in modernization did attract lots of French Canadians to other cities. However the arrival of television helped influence the French Canadians which led them away from Duplessis. In fact urbanization did lead The French away from Duplessis and the Union National because they were concentrated on rural and small town areas and television promoted a modern and urbanized world, something that was relatively new to the French Canadian.

In sum Duplessis used religion to influence the French Canadian which preached against modernization and urbanization. Kenneth McRoberts does not have a single cause or link to the up coming Quiet Revolution and endorses religion as the central theme which imprisoned the French Canadian in a systematic bureaucracy of religious beliefs.

The Lesage government was the complete opposite of Duplessis, an interventionist government dedicated to improving the French Canadian's position within the business community. During the Quiet Revolution the French began to reject the notion of the English as having all the upper managerial positions. The English had these upper managerial positions because the French never attempted in the past to break into the business community. This was true primarily because religion forbade it and looked at the business community as alien to French Canadian culture.

The Lesage government therefore initiated several programs that were designed for helping the French Canadian break into the business community. Some of these initiatives included; Cegeps with a changed curriculum to help the French obtain the necessary tools to help them in the business community, expansion of the French Canadian private sector, Hydro Quebec, Sidbec, SGF, and the Manicougan Dam Project that was solely built by French Canadians. Therefore the Lesage government built a highly efficient technological society as Kenneth McRoberts puts it. He instigated programs that were aimed specifically at the French to help them integrate into the English community.

The Lesage government saw the potential problem of integrating the French into the English community as one of assimilation. The primary problem for the French was language knowledge and the mode of sophistication that the English were used to contrasted sharply with a farmer based agrarian way of life. Therefore the

government intervened in which they created enterprises to provide jobs for the French Canadian. Enterprises such as Cable Vision, Provigo, La Caisse Du Depot and Bombardier amongst others. This would create positions for the Francophone business class.

Education reform was significant because it was the first area that was freed from clerical domination. Therefore education was the first step to improving the French Canadian's position in which French would be the official spoken language at work. The French were also worried about the large influx of immigrants that were coming into Quebec because the immigrants chose English schools as their language of education, which to the French was a rejection of French identity and culture. The French were especially nervous because as immigrant numbers grew their demographic position over the English in Quebec declined. Therefore the government forced immigrants to go to French school to avoid a growth in the English population.

The economical aspect in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution, as Kenneth McRoberts mentions, was a struggle for power and wealth instead of status and prestige. Divisions were shifted from the traditional rich and poor to English and French. Also divisions within the French community developed between the upper and lower class French. The division between the French occurred because the upper class French collaborated with the English. The upper classes were collaborating because they were aiming to achieve access to international markets. The lower classes on the other hand were more interested in Quebec and family owned small businesses. Therefore the book points out that the nationalist view of Quebec came to view that an independent Quebec could only be achieved through the lower class French and rejected the upper classes regardless of the language. The problem with the nationalist was that national culture lies within the French lower classes and so independence could only be achieved through the lower classes' support. The Parti Quebecois' emergence was a result of, lower class discontent with their position inside the business community, the need for more power, and Quebec's weak economy due to French Canadian's life styles.

The rise of the PQ was subtle in that it began with the demand for more power from Ottawa. Quebec wanted more power so that it could manage its economy according to French Canadian interests. When Ottawa refused, Canada was blamed for Quebec's economic weakness. The rejected demands to Ottawa rallied support from lower class French for a country where they could be "maitre chez nous". The bargaining between Ottawa and Quebec changed because Ottawa was dealing for the first time with a separatist movement firmly committed to separation. On the other hand Canada was also firmly committed to keeping Quebec inside Canada,

especially under Trudeau, a time when the PQ was at the height of its power. Through out the seventies's Trudeau's main strategy towards Quebec was introducing bilingualism for all of Canada. The federalist campaign under Trudeau founded their beliefs that a strong Federal presence in Quebec must be kept to counter balance the separatist drift. When Bourassa came to power in Quebec the model was state intervention to encourage investment of private capital, especially American. Bourassa also believed that he should avoid independence at all costs. However Bourassa saw the need for the Quebec government to obtain political independence to manage its economy. Bourassa believed in a "Laissez Faire" economy putting all of its faith into private enterprise. Bourassa also recognized that he had to strengthen the French language of which he did under Bill 22 which recognized French as the official language. The Bill also stated that only parents with sufficient knowledge of English could send their children to English school. This sparked alienation amongst the English but did not hurt the Liberals at elections because the French were afraid of the cost of separation and did not vote for the PQ.

However the PQ's position got better with time as the French middle class began to have an impact at the voting poles. The middle class was made up of the professional and semi-professional sector made up of the public sector and the technocrats. But this was a problem for the PQ because they lacked the support of a capitalist class. This, coupled with the fact that Quebec was controlled from the outside would make the task of independence long and hard and without financial support.

On November, 15 1976 the PQ was elected to power under Rene Levesque whose main strategy consisted of providing good government to show the French as well as the international markets that it could manage its own affairs. The PQ had to deal with the fact that Quebecers had always been afraid of radical change such as independence. Therefore the PQ began their term by improving the economic conditions of French Canadians. They introduced a minimum wage, the highest in North America. They also introduced social insurances to help the economically disadvantaged such as paid medicine for the elderly, dental cost covered for children 16 and under, and banned the use of advertising aimed at children. They reduced public spending to the discontent of the public sector which feared the lost of jobs. This led the main unions, the CSN and CEQ, to oppose the PQ policies. Kenneth McRoberts mentions that this encouraged the PQ's search for financial support in the international markets. This is contradicted the PQ's earlier statement that Quebec must be controlled by the French lower classes rather than being controlled from the outside.

In sum the PQ would have to secure power within Canada to gain support for sovereignty as proof that it could lead a country. It would also have to secure the support of the majority of Francophones of which the upper classes and major unions were already opposed to.

The PQ's strategy began by speaking an economic association with the rest of Canada. It also had to convince the population that although the costs of separation would be enormous at first the longterm effects would be beneficial with which Kenneth McRoberts agrees. Quebec had no big financial people backing separation because these people were concerned about broken links with the international markets if Quebec separated.

Canadians played a big part in the PQ's opposition to separation because Canadians worried about what would happen to their ruptured country. Canadians reasoned that if one region separated then maybe the rest of the country would too. So the Federal government had to worry not only of what Quebecers felt but also of what the rest of Canada felt. The rest of Canada saw Quebec as just another region like all the others and Westerners saw the separation of Quebec as their chance to gain more economic advantages inside Canada. Fearing the rupture of Canada, Ottawa based it's campaign on the cost of separation which French Canadians feared. Therefore the outcome is not surprising in that the PQ lost the support of the French business class and the public union which only left supportive lower classes. Canada's fundamental strategy was that the French feared radical change therefore focus was concentrated on the cost of separation. After the defeat of the referendum Canadian unity was secured and a renewed constitution restricted Quebec's powers more then pre-referendum debates.

Therefore abandoning the separation issue the PQ's second term was a radical reverse of what its first term had been. The main differences in the PQ's second term was that it collaborated with the Federal government to a point where many Pequiste saw Rene Levesque as a traitor who turned his back on the Quebec cause. In sum the PQ distanced itself from the sovereignty issue and concentrated on running the government as best that it could within Canada.

The Liberal normalization under Bourassa was characterized as a radical rollback or complete opposite of what The Quiet Revolution stood for. The Liberals reasoned with the fact that the French Canadians were well established and that they did not need the government intervention that they were given during the Quiet Revolution. During this period the Liberals were going to abolish or merge 100 corporations or big companies. They were going to reduce the taxes on big business so as to

encourage investment in the province. They would also raise the level at which families were taxed which would exempt 45 000 families from taxation. The liberals also did attempt to rollback on Bill 101 and organized labour but opposition was so great that they were unable to touch the bill and organized labourers.

The other big issue on the agenda was Constitutional reform. The Liberals were asking for five major points which were: A veto for Quebec, A distinct Society clause, limited spending in provincial jurisdictions, the right to nominate supreme court justices, and more power for Quebec concerning immigration. Although Meech Lake did recognize intergovernmental arrangements it failed because, according to Kenneth McRoberts, the rest of Canada did not recognize Quebec as a distinct society. Many people looked at the Meech Lake accord as the Surrendering of Canada.

In the conclusions and Postscript Kenneth McRoberts states his over all impression of the political change in Quebec and also mentions his antidotes for the future. Kenneth McRoberts states that one of Quebec biggest economic problems was that it depended too much on outside capital, especially Ontario and the U.S. Quebec's economy was controlled from the outside which Explains Quebec's weak technological industries and meant that Quebec exported it's raw materials and imported finished products. This process of being controlled from the outside was helped during the fifties because the Duplesis regime literally sold quebec to the U.S. and further discouraged business practices amongst the French Canadians. What freed the French Canadians which enabled them to work their way into the business class was the end of the domination of education, health & welfare by the clergy, according to Kenneth McRoberts.

Education was the key to the Quiet Revolution and was responsible for the emergence of a French business and middle class during the sixties. Once education, was freed from clerical control, French Canadians began their rise to power. Education shifted the french way of life from rural farming to urban industrial work. Education also played a role in terms of immigration in that it was used to integrate immigrants into French society so that the French demographic position could remain high in Quebec.

The emergence of the French business class also caused the emergence of the division amongst the French. This division would consist of the rich business class and the poor industrial worker and rural French. This division caused great problems for the sovereignist because the financial strength of Quebec would never back independence because their international links in business would become

jeopardized. This division amongst the French left the sovereignty movement with no financial support.

As nationalism gained momentum, according to Kenneth McRoberts, two consequences occurred; the business class of Montreal went into exodus and moved to Toronto and a constitutional battle arose between Ottawa and Quebec over language and Quebec's recognition as a distinct society. Therefore Canada under Trudeau changed its face to one of bilingualism. Trudeau therefore began by appointing French Canadians to the Federal cabinet so that French Canadians could begin to relate to the Federal government. As Nationalism grew Montreal's status as a major economic city declined and Toronto's status grew which made the French Canadians react in a way that they blamed English Toronto for this economic decline which added steam to Nationalism.

In conclusion Kenneth McRoberts states that Nationalism will not die and it's emergence in the future will depend on the cultural differences between Quebec's ability to survive within North America. Kenneth McRoberts believes that American culture will weaken the Quebecois' sense of identity. He showed statistical proof showing that the demographic weight of French Canadians will decline in the years to come. Cultural tension will remain because of Bill 101's violation of freedom of speech which broke Canada's dream for equality. The Distinct Society Clause led to the failure of Meech Lake and led Quebec to believe that it was rejected by the rest of Canada. Quebec's ambition for separation will depend on Canada's will to accept Quebec as a distinct society.

My personal view focuses on religion and its role in confusing language divisions and economic divisions and the Distinct Society Clause.

In Quebec there are two types of cultural divisions, French\English and rich\poor. I believe that the most important division is rich and poor. Essentially you have two ideologies, one of capitalism and one of language. I believe that the capitalist ideology is stronger because to this day money has reunited the rich in staying in power as the saying goes "the richer get richer and the poorer get poorer". This has nothing to do with race or language; Black rich verses Black poor or French rich verses French poor. We see to this day that the language issue has clearly not been as powerful in reuniting people under sovereignty as monetary issues have been in breaking sovereignty.

I believe the single cause for the confusion of these divisions was religion. Religion created the divisions of French and English because religion for the French Canadian prevented economical advances. This meant that business would be let solely in control of the English. Before the fifties the friction was between two classes, the lower and upper classes. Kenneth McRoberts mention this in that French business classes collaborated with the English because class ranked first in priority, not Language. I believe that the Lesage government was the major transition from a class problem to a language problem in Quebec. He instigated programs that were aimed specifically towards a language group rather than a class group. This alienated the English which alienated the French and the cycle just goes round and round and never seems to stop.

The second problem I have is Quebec's Distinct Society Clause and the idea that Quebec has always seen itself as a distinct society. I look at the term distinct society and I believe that every society anywhere on the globe is distinct. French are distinct from Germans who are distinct from British who are distinct from Greeks. I believe that every society is distinct from every other. I believe that the term "Distinct Society" is a given and applies to everybody. Quebecers seem to turn to a distinct society argument as protection against assimilation. The Truth is that culturally French Quebecers are much more bound to their culture as compared to Canadians. American culture is assimilating English Canadians much more then French Canadians. I believe that when a society is small in numbers it's chances of being assimilated compared to a more populated society in far less. I believe that a society that is few in numbers is less vulnerable to be assimilated because the awareness of assimilation is present. Where as a larger society may not be conscious of assimilation which may actually open the door to assimilation.

by Pierre Hobson