

The Quebec separatism crisis is quietly and slowly fading

The percentage of French Quebecers seriously tempted by independence appears to have moved from 50 per cent in the 1980 referendum to 60 per cent in 1995, to less than 40 per cent now

by Conrad Black



Quebec is completing a full election cycle, as the Parti Québécois, which in its time under René Lévesque, Jacques Parizeau and Lucien Bouchard, shook the country and gained international attention, is in its death throes. Quebec had Liberal and Conservative provincial parties from 1867 to 1935. The Conservatives governed for 24 of the first 30 years, largely because of the prestige of John A. Macdonald, even after the execution of Louis Riel, and the early days of Wilfrid Laurier. But after Macdonald died, the Quebec Liberals, espousing Laurier and complaining about military conscription in 1917, were constantly in government in Quebec

from 1897 to 1936. In that year, Maurice Duplessis, who had led the provincial Conservatives since 1931 and had formed the Union Nationale by uniting his party with some dissident reform Liberals, was elected to the first of a still unmatched five full terms as premier of Quebec.

His tactic was to get the conservatives and the nationalists to vote together, a delicate operation because too much nationalism would frighten the conservatives and too much conservatism would disgust the nationalists. But it was the only method to defeat the Liberals, the fixed point in Quebec politics, because the Liberals successfully represented themselves in Quebec as the only party that could make Canada work for Quebec, and outside Quebec as the only party that could keep Quebec happily in Canada. There was some truth to this, as the Conservatives never had a federal leader who knew anything about Quebec between Macdonald and Brian Mulroney.

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Duplessis' formula was to revile the provincial Liberals as puppets of Ottawa and to get all that Quebec might aspire to within the Constitution (British North America Act), while assuring the conservatives of retention of traditional values, peace and order, rising prosperity, and the official discouragement of radicalism, atheism and excessive secularization. The Roman Catholic Church was greatly venerated as it had provided practically all the education and health care that had enabled the French fact to survive in Quebec for more than 150 years after the British defeat of France in 1759 at Quebec. Duplessis played upon the susceptibility of the bishops while dispensing them money that was very efficiently applied to schools, universities and hospitals. The clerical personnel in the schools and hospitals

were much less well-paid and avaricious than their secular counterparts in other jurisdictions, enabling Duplessis through the Forties and Fifties to lower taxes, balance the budget and devote almost all of the province's revenue to infrastructure; roads, 3,000 schools, the autoroutes, rural electrification, and all the universities in the province except McGill (and he was generous to McGill and other English institutions).



The Quebec flag is seen overlooking the Ottawa River from the Civilization Museum behind Parliament Hill in Gatineau on Sept 19, 2012. ANDRE FORGET/QMI AGENCY

By every conceivable indicator, it was the only time until the McGuinty-Wynne economic miracle of impoverishment in Ontario (2003-2018), when Quebec was gaining on Ontario. The fabrication of the leftist media that it was a time of darkness in Quebec, *la Grande Noirceur*, was a mighty confidence trick that would not fly while Duplessis was there to rebut it. Somewhat more truthful, though a bit of a stretch, was his claim that "A vote for the Liberals is a vote for the oil lamp, the gravel road, and abject submission to Ottawa." It was a priest-ridden society but an increasingly prosperous and educated one. Quebec led Canada in daycare and statutory workers' rights (enabling Duplessis' high-handed treatment of labour unions). He won the majority of the votes of French-speaking Quebecers in an astounding seven consecutive elections (1935-1956). The vulnerabilities of his system were that it required a political magician to operate it, and secularization became irresistible. Paul Sauvé was there to succeed Duplessis and Daniel Johnson to succeed Sauvé, but all three died in office, Sauvé and Johnson in their early fifties, and the balancing act came down from the high-wire. (Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger told me in 1971 that Duplessis had once said to him, in respect of the Church: "If you squeeze a fish hard enough, it will get away;" and that he had replied: "We're not squeezing it, you are.")

The Liberals had usually had the second and fourth blocs and enough of the rest to win

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