

Why Maurice Duplessis Won Four Straight Terms

by Conrad Black

I am probably the only person still standing who observes June 20 as a political anniversary: this year it was the 60th anniversary of the last of Maurice Duplessis' unmatched five general election victories as premier of Quebec. Gouin, Taschereau and Bourassa won four elections, though of those, only Louis-Alexandre Taschereau had four full terms. Duplessis died in office, but there was little doubt that if he had survived in vigorous health, he would have been re-elected again.

I have been vaguely meaning to rebut a news story of John Ivison's in the National Post on June 24, 2014 (St-Jean-Baptiste Day), ever since it was published. Ivison claimed that Duplessis had exceeded any current Canadian politician in the unscrupulous vitriol of his rhetorical bashing of adversaries. Ivison also wrote that Duplessis was in league with the Roman Catholic clergy to hold Quebec in a state of public policy retardation. "With the solid backing of the Roman Catholic Church," Ivison wrote two years ago, "strong support in rural areas, and his opposition to conscription" – (1917, and chiefly opposed by the Liberals) – "Duplessis was able to survive the transition into the modern, post-war era that brought down even towering figures of the day like Winston Churchill."

Never, in the history of this country, has there been such a fine example of history as, in Napoleon's famous phrase, "lies agreed upon."

In accord with my modest observation of the date, I watched a YouTube extract from Duplessis' remarks, delivered to tens of

thousands of his followers from the steps of his home in Trois-Rivières (which he rarely inhabited). He said: "It is now a matter of forgetting the slanders and imbecilities of some of those who have lost tonight. For my part, I promise to try to forget them, and the authors of them." The general act of forgetfulness swiftly descended rather on Duplessis after he and his chosen successor, Paul Sauvé, died, not four months apart (Sept. 7, 1959 and Jan. 1, 1960).

On Ivison's sentence quoted above, the Roman Catholic Church, which was strongly adhered to by about 85 per cent of Quebec's entire population, politically represented the people, not the other way round. Contrary to widespread myth and lore, French Quebec was not composed of illiterate peasants toiling by hand in unremitting fields, interrupted only by black-frocked priests tolling the bells for prayers every three daylight hours. Ivison, as a U.K. native, should have known that the British had not had an election between 1935, when the Conservatives of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain had told them that war could be averted, until when Churchill, with no policy except his undisputed war service, returned in 1945 to an electorate seeking a post-Empire vision for Britain in the world and a less class-riven society at home. Duplessis had been in opposition during the war and returned to office in 1944, promising to regain powers that had been allocated to Ottawa during the war, and to gain recognition of Quebec's concurrent right to direct taxes. The political events are no more comparable than the jurisdictions or the individuals.

Duplessis carried the French working class of Quebec in six of the seven general elections when he was a party leader, and the last four despite the opposition of most of the leadership of organized labour. He discouraged labour unrest, but legislated increased wages and benefits. From 1944 to 1959, Quebec and Ontario both enjoyed gross increases in primary and manufacturing production of about 8.5 per cent annually, and despite Quebec's heavy birthrate, average pay rose 160 per

cent, compared to 140 per cent in Ontario. The number of motor vehicles in Quebec increased by 850 per cent, compared to 300 per cent in Ontario. The number of university students in Quebec tripled, to a larger total than Ontario's, though Quebec had only 80 per cent of Ontario's population. All relevant indicators of economic and social progress followed the same pattern. Duplessis built 3,000 schools, all the university campuses except McGill, all the original autoroutes, and rural electrification connected to 97 per cent of homes, up from about 20 per cent in 1944. Despite the larger Quebec families, Quebec's per capita personal income rose from 65 per cent of Ontario's in 1944 to 87 per cent of Ontario's in 1959. Quebec had the most comprehensive daycare system of any province by the middle of the Fifties.

These and related facts were the reasons that Duplessis won four straight terms starting in 1944. There was no conspiracy with the higher clergy. The Quebec Church was not a monolith and this theory, retailed as historic fact by Ivison, is just the lore of fiction, Liberal and leftist excuses for their many defeats at the hands of Duplessis. But in one sense, Ivison's analysis was correct: Duplessis played on the paranoia of the rural bishops that there had to be clerical personnel in the schools and hospitals of French and Irish Quebec or the province would lose its Christian character. As educational and medical facilities were steadily expanded (the Quebecers' life expectancy in the period increased from four years less than Ontario's to just a few months less), the Church became steadily more dependent on the state financially. Duplessis summarized this in his famous utterance, "The bishops eat from my hand."

The key to Duplessis' success was in two strategies. By maintaining clerical personnel in most of the education and health-care systems, he saved an immense amount of money that would have had to go to secular teachers, nurses and administrators. This enabled him to balance the budget, reduce

taxes and, along with the pre-emption of militant labour by generating improving wages, enabled Quebec to attract immense amounts of outside investment, especially in the natural resources and manufacturing sectors. This generated much of the huge rise in prosperity and Duplessis ensured that it was spread around the population generously. His second technique was to demand more for Quebec jurisdictionally. He adopted the fleur-de-lis flag and finally forced the St. Laurent government to concede Quebec's right to a share of direct taxes. He thus achieved the dual political feat of securing the vote of the nationalists and the conservatives. This required great dexterity, not to be too nationalistic for the conservatives or too conservative for the nationalists. His formula was to demand with great vigour that Ottawa give way, but make the point that he was only calling for what the British North America Act provided: nationalist table-pounding to achieve the letter of the law.

He said, "The Quebec nationalists are a 10-pound fish on a five-pound line, you have to reel them in carefully and let them out carefully. I shut them up for 10 years with a flag. I'll shut them up for another 10 years by opening relations with France" – with Gen. Charles de Gaulle, he declined to take the Fourth Republic seriously – "and for a decade after that with a World's Fair." And he told Montreal's Cardinal Paul-Emilie Léger, in referring to the Quebec Church: "If you squeeze a fish hard enough, it will get away." The cardinal replied: "I'm not squeezing the fish, you are." Of course he was, and Quebec could not go on much longer as a priest-ridden society. But he, Paul Sauvé and Daniel Johnson would have provided a much more gradual and successful transition than the chaos of what has been pleased to call itself the Quiet Revolution.

The chief characteristic of this era has been the same personnel teaching the same students the same curriculum and caring for the hospitalized in the same edifices at 10 and

then 20 times the cost to the taxpayers. Freedom of expression has been abridged in the name of culture, 425,000 French speakers and as many non-French have left Quebec, and the collapsed birthrate is being thinly disguised by Haitian, Lebanese, and North African immigration. Duplessis said: "You will take my place but you will not replace me." He was right.

First published in the