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# Canada/Québec On the Brink

A Book Review by Mark Wegierski

Although many books have appeared recently on the Canada/Quebec issue, this work "differs from these in that it is written by a Montrealer who now works in Washington [D.C.] and observes the movement towards sovereignty in Quebec from both U.S. and Canadian points of view." Lemco has had a successful career in the U.S. foreign policy/think-tank bureaucracies, so this work may partially be seen as an unofficial expression of some of their thinking. Nevertheless, the book should be viewed more as an explanation of various highly complex matters, rather than a "point-of-view" kind of work. Indeed, the book might well serve as core reading material in many college courses in Canadian studies or politics.

There are six highly useful appendices in the book: Bill 101: Charter of the French Language; the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (only those sections dealing with language and Quebec, though); a sketch of possible future institutional structures for Canada/Quebec (by Ronald L. Watts); Roadmap Summary Statements — which juxtaposes the positions of different commissions, and the agreements reached regarding the Canadian constitution, on the more critical issues; A Roadmap for National Unity, which looks at some of the key terms/concepts in the Canadian constitutional debate; and the text of the Charlottetown Agreement. Lemco has pulled together in one volume much useful information, including statistical and polling data.

The appendices provide an interesting frame. Bill 101, which passed the province of Quebec's parliament (which is formally called "the National Assembly") on August 26, 1977, a short while after the separatist Parti Québécois had come to power, while immensely popular among French-speaking Québécois, caused enormous resentment in English Canada, and among the English-speaking minorities in Quebec. It proclaimed that "French is the official language of Quebec," and went on to enumerate a long list of enhancing and prohibitive measures to promote the "francization" of Quebec.

Prime Minister Trudeau's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) had also caused intense conflict when the Premier of Quebec, René Lévesque of the Parti Québécois, refused to assent to it — because it under-

mined Quebec's collective rights — thus precipitating a constitutional impasse which has continued to the present day. Trudeau's policy toward the French fact in Canada could be summed up by the phrase: "for Quebec (as a collectivity) — *nothing*; for French Canadians (as individuals) — *everything*."

The Charlottetown Agreement was overwhelmingly rejected by both Quebec and the rest of Canada in the countrywide referendum of 1992. The ambiguity manifest in many places in the Agreement stands in

marked contrast to the thoroughgoing nature of Bill 101. The Agreement had been cobbled together by Canada's political leadership in the wake of the failure in 1990 of the Meech Lake Accord of 1987. The great sticking point of the Accord was the recognition of Quebec as a "distinct society" — an obvious historical and

sociological fact. A curious coalition arose in English Canada against the Accord — a combination of traditional disdain for Quebec, with the left-liberal fear that a recognition of Quebec's collective rights could possibly result in a "tyrannical," "minority-bashing," Quebec regime.

Many of Lemco's arguments take up the issue of whether Quebec can continue to prosper as an independent or quasi-independent entity. While he acknowledges that it would be "viable," he sees the possibility of a quite substantive drop in Quebec's standard of living. As far as the U.S. reaction goes, Lemco argues that the U.S., while generally favoring a united Canada, will neither hasten nor impede a separation process, as long as it can be seen to be the expression of the population of Quebec.

Lemco also points out that the psychological sense of siege among the Québécois has been amplified by their demographic crisis. Quebec has one of the lowest birthrates, and one of the highest abortion rates, in the Western world. The consequences of the so-called "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s in Quebec, which largely excised the traditional influence of the Roman Catholic Church (in the 1950s, families of fifteen children were not uncommon) have been curiously double-edged in terms of the prospects of Québécois survival. On the one hand, the Québécois gained a modern, technocratic, highly advanced commercial

## TURMOIL IN THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM: THE QUEBEC SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

By Jonathan Lemco

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province-wide "state" but, on the other, they now seem to be in danger of losing both their soul and physical existence as a people, in their almost visceral disdain for posterity. (Perhaps the high school drop-out rate of nearly 40 percent is also indicative of deeper tensions.) While Lemco points out that Quebec outside of Montreal is one of the most homogenous areas in North America, if not on the planet, how long is it likely to remain so? The desire by some Québécois to obtain widescale immigration (e.g. from Haiti or former French Africa) — only if it were French-speaking — could also be seen as a negative option by more authentic nationalists.

In a work of general introduction to Canada/Quebec, Lemco has failed to mention one of the major conditioning factors of this relationship — the changing perspective in English Canada on the ideological provenance of Quebec nationalism. Lemco fails to note that, for many liberals, Quebec nationalism was once one of the few European nationalist impulses that they viewed as wholly legitimate. This was because it had an invariably leftward character, as the Québécois were seen as victims of British imperialism. Similarly, Irish nationalism and Catalan identity (attacked by Franco) were viewed favorably. The Québécois were also fortunate that their linguistic and ethnic identity were so closely intertwined — by promoting their language, they were, in effect, promoting their ethnicity (which would otherwise be seen as a democratically illegitimate procedure). As English Canada has become increasingly and more intensely left-liberal in hue, it has developed an ideology-based resentment against the Québécois. English Canada has acquired a harshness toward Quebec which contrasts sharply with the highly accommodating attitude it has toward both aboriginal peoples (who are today in virtually open revolt, and claim almost all of Canadian territory); and visible minorities (most of whom have arrived in Canada in the last three decades, because of very liberal immigration policies). Traditional English Canada is thus delegitimized in the crossfire of aboriginal and visible minority claims (as well as by the gender politics which are probably among the most vociferous in the world), while obsessively focusing on Quebec. (There are now, for example, huge shopping complexes being built north of Toronto, which are effectively, "Chinese-only.")

On October 30, 1995, a decisive referendum on sovereignty was held in Quebec in which over 90 percent of eligible voters took part. The pro-sovereignty side lost by an unusually close margin of less than one percent. They were led by Jacques Parizeau, Quebec Premier and Parti Québécois leader; Lucien Bouchard, leader of the Bloc Québécois in the federal Parliament; and Mario Dumont, the young leader of a smaller sovereigntist party in the Quebec National Assembly. Because of the tightness of the race, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien (who is also from Quebec) hastily promised, five days before the vote, to try again to push

through the constitutional recognition of Quebec's "distinctiveness."

In an unbelievably quick development attesting to the prevalent left-liberal climate of Canada, Jacques Parizeau was forced to resign a day after his concession speech in which he said that "sixty percent of us [i.e. French-speakers] voted "Yes," and that the defeat was due to "money and the ethnic vote." For this he was called a "fascist," an "Adolph Hitler," and an "ethnic nationalist," in a massive wave of denunciation that swept the country's media. He was attacked even by some members of his own party.

Current-day Canadian nationalism, it appears, is mainly defined by its embrace of multiculturalism. The irony is that Quebec, with its separatist nationalism, probably has more of a substantive basis as a true nation today than what is often somewhat-curiously called (TROC) "the rest of Canada." ■