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Solitudes and Solidarity: English and French in Canada

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Canada has two official languages, English and French. That linguistic distinction is one of the markers of Canadian nationalism, and usually one of the sources of national pride. But like many other bilingual nations, Canada's history is marked by periods of conflict in which the minority group, in this case the francophone Canadians, feel that their rights are being undermined or ignored. Sometimes the discontent has flared into threats of separation. In Canada, these uprisings have usually been political rather than military, thankfully, but they have occurred with almost cyclic regularity.

Referendum of 1995

The most recent, and perhaps most cataclysmic, uprising came in 1995, when the government of the province of Quebec, the seat of francophone power, asked their citizens to vote on the proposition that they should "start the process toward becoming a recognized nation state, whereas its people, language, culture and political institutions will be able to protect their own identity within the global community." The response was negative, but by the narrowest of margins: *NO* 50.56 percent, *YES* 49.44 percent.

The national tension leading up to the referendum had been excruciating, and all Canadians except the most rabid Quebec secessionists were enormously relieved by the result, notwithstanding its closeness. The reason is obvious geographically. Looking at the map of Canada, it is easy to see that Quebec, the second-largest land mass of the ten provinces (after Ontario), stands between the Atlantic provinces on the east (Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island) and all the other provinces to the west. If Quebec were to become an independent nation, Canada would have to negotiate for corridors linking the two sectors of the country, leading inevitably to ruptured affiliations, economic disparities, Balkanization and interminable border conflicts.

Geographically, an independent Quebec simply seems impossible.

Culturally, it seems unnecessary. Quebec and the francophone Canadians outside Quebec share numerous cultural values with anglophone Canadians, from parliamentary government to the passion for ice hockey. However, there are some cultural values which Quebec and the rest of Canada do not share, as I will discuss below, and as long as these persist we should expect the cyclic pattern of conflict to persist as well. Leading up to the discussion of disparate values, I will briefly present the essential background, first in the history that led to French-speakers and English-speakers sharing the vast Canadian region, and second in the demolinguistics of the francophone and anglophone distribution.

Canada, showing the ten provinces and three territories, with the largest metropolitan areas and cities.

Imperialist Struggles over Canada

In the quest for empire in the 17th and 18th centuries, Canada got caught between two European powers. Because Canada is due west of England, one of the first discoveries in the European quest for a sea route to the Orient was Newfoundland, Canada's easternmost province and thus the nearest land mass to Europe on the Atlantic Ocean. In 1497, just five years after Columbus made his historic landing to the south, England laid claim to Newfoundland.

The English claim to the rest of Canada was not as direct. In the Atlantic region of the present Maritime Provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island on the map), the French arrived before the English and established colonies there, in what they called Acadia. Samuel de Champlain, the first French governor, founded a settlement called Port Royal at the inlet to the St. Lawrence River in 1605. Three years

later, in 1608, he established a second colony, *Nouvelle France*, inland in the vicinity of present-day Quebec City and Montreal.

In spite of these activities, France seemed uninterested in its imperialist role in North America. By the middle of the 18th century, more than a century after it was founded, the population of Nouvelle France numbered only about 70,000. The colonists were the descendants of some 10,000 individuals sent out to the New World from the mother country in a period of 150 years. Even though the birthrate in Nouvelle France was among the highest in the world, this trickle of settlers was hardly enough to establish critical mass. By contrast, England, with only one-third the population of France, sent many more settlers to its North American colonies, usually with incentives of free sea passage and freehold farmland to encourage them. This disparity had important consequences not only for Canadian history but for world history. They were described eloquently by the demographer Alfred Sauvy (translated by Lachapelle and Henripin):

> It sufficed that one of the two countries competing for a vast continent sent a few thousand settlers each year, while the other sent a few hundred, and the course of history was radically changed. This is both tragic and symbolic, since, just when the French language had reached international predominance in Europe, through its great demographic superiority, it was sealing its fate in the world at large because a few boats more, filled with illiterates, left England every year.

Partly as a result of this disparity, France suffered defeats in two wars and was forced to cede both colonies to England, turning over Acadia in 1716 and Nouvelle France in 1763.

The British turned out to be relatively benevolent governors in Canada. They immediately issued proclamations safeguarding certain rights of the native peoples, including the requirement that ancestral lands could be surrendered only upon execution of legal treaties. They also instituted the Quebec Act in 1774 in order to establish the legal boundaries of their French-speaking colony in what had been Nouvelle France. In 1791, when hundreds of English-speaking immigrants arrived as refugees from the American Revolution, the governors passed the Constitution Act dividing 'Quebec' into two separate colonies called Lower Canada (present-day Quebec) and Upper Canada (present-day Ontario). As a result, the boundaries of the French-language colony remained distinct even as the French-speaking population became a minority.

These administrative divisions guaranteed that the cultural and linguistic heritage of the French colonials would be perpetuated in the new land. By granting autonomy to francophone language and culture, the governors inevitably (and knowingly) complicated Canadian national solidarity. The partial independence of French and English Canadians came to be characterized as "two solitudes," an image borrowed by a Canadian novelist from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

> Love consists in this,
> that two solitudes protect,
> and touch, and greet each other.

Although the "two solitudes" indicate separateness and independence, the poet says that any meaningful union (love in his case, political federation in ours) entails breaking down the barriers of solitude and joining together as allies and intimate friends.

In 1867, when England's northern colonies were united to form Canada as an autonomous nation, the Confederation Act guaranteed French-language rights. Those rights were perpetuated as the confederation spread westward and northward, so that today they hold across a vast nation, the second-largest land-mass in the world.

English and French in a Vast Land

All regions of Canada are institutionally bilingual. Every citizen has the right to be served in either French or English by government agencies, tried in either language in federal courts, informed in either language in public announcements on radio and television, and advised in both languages on product labels and on official documents such as tax forms.

These rights are part of the federal constitution, and hold for all provinces and territories. In addition, two provinces have separate linguistic provisions in their constitutions: New Brunswick is constitutionally bilingual, and Quebec is officially monolingual French.

Quebec's monolingualism follows from an acute sensitivity about preserving their distinctive society. Quebec alone has protectionist laws forbidding employers from requiring any language but French of prospective employees and forbidding merchants from displaying signs in any language but French. Paradoxically, federal provisions on bilingualism ensure a nationwide presence for French from the Atlantic to the Pacific, even in regions where the francophone population is nonexistent, but the nationwide presence of English is interrupted officially, though not actually, by Quebec monolingualism.

There is a considerable disparity in sheer numbers between the French-speaking and the English-speaking populations. The numbers in Table 1 represent Canadians according to their "mother-tongue," defined in the Canadian census as the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual. In percentages, as shown in the columns to the left, the mother-tongue groups are proportioned as follows: 59.2 per cent speak English, 22.7 per cent speak French, 0.4 per cent are English-French bilinguals, and 17.5 per cent have a mother tongue neither English nor French. It is important to point out, as a cautionary note, that these mother-tongue figures grossly under-represent bilingualism in all guises. These figures count only 'true bilinguals', rare individuals who learned both French and English from birth. There are, of course, millions of other

bilinguals in Canada whose competence in the two languages is asymmetrical or unequal. In fact, French-English bilingualism has been increasing, as I point out in a later section.

Bilingualism aside, the French mother-tongue population is heavily concentrated in the province of Quebec. The concentration shows up dramatically when Quebec's numbers are left out of the demolinguistic calculations in the columns on the right in Table 1: outside of Quebec, English is the mother tongue of 75.5 per cent (17 million of 22.5), French of 4.2 per cent (fewer than a million), bilingual French-English (true bilinguals) 0.2 per cent (67,245), and non-official languages, remarkably, of 19.9 per cent (almost 4.5 million).

Comparing the percentages displayed side-by-side in Table 1 reveals the demographic significance dramatically. One inference that will become important in a later section is that Quebec accounts for a disproportionately small percentage of immigrant languages, that is, non-official languages. This is visible by observing that the proportion of non-official mother-tongue speakers rises when Quebec is omitted; in other words, Quebec is dragging the percentages down.

	Canada		**excluding Quebec**	
Mother tongue	%	Total	%	Total
English	59.2	17,572,175	75.5	17,000,090
French	22.7	6,741,955	4.2	953,300
English-French bilingual	0.4	122,660	0.2	67,245
Non-official	17.5	5,202,245	19.9	4,492,830

Table 1—Demolinguistics of Canada including Quebec and excluding Quebec (based on Statistics Canada, last modified 20 January 2003)

When we compare the percentages for English and French mother-tongue speakers in Table 1, the concentration of French speakers in Quebec stands out clearly. Outside Quebec, French is the mother tongue of 4.2 per cent of the population. (It is actually more concentrated than it looks: more than half of those French speakers outside Quebec live in neighbouring regions of Ontario.) Historically, the proportion of French speakers in Canada has been increasing in Quebec and decreasing in the rest of Canada at least since 1931, the first year the census recorded mother-tongue statistics.

The relative isolation of francophones within the provincial boundaries

is one obvious source of Quebec anxiety about the survival of its language and culture. Quebec feels like an island surrounded by an ocean of English-ness, especially when you remember that the United States lies below Quebec's southern border. Quebec's protective measures, however, have led to a sociolinguistic spiral that has, in a sense, increased their isolation. Legislation such as French-only language laws in Quebec causes disaffection among the English-language minority and often leads to emigration to other provinces, which further concentrates the French speakers in the province.

The linguistic disparity is actually greater than Table 1 shows. Because it tabulates mother-tongue statistics rather than functional language use, it inadvertently obscures the extent to which Canada is an English-speaking country. The figure for the English-speaking population outside Quebec is large at 75.5 per cent, but in addition it must be kept in mind that Canadians whose mother tongue is a non-official language, almost 20 per cent of the population, are usually speakers of English, not French, as a second language. That brings the actual proportion of anglophones outside Quebec close to 95 per cent.

Immigration and Insularity

As mentioned above, one point of contrast in Table 1 is between Quebec and the rest of Canada with respect to non-official languages. This difference has far-reaching sociolinguistic implications. Census figures show that in Ontario, 23.6 per cent of the population (2,672,095 of 11,285,560) have a mother tongue other than French or English, whereas in Quebec only 9.9 per cent (709,415 of 7,125,570) do. This difference distinguishes the two provinces, and it is at the root of a sharp distinction in certain cultural values, as we shall see.

Ontario, and indeed all of anglophone Canada, chose immigration as the principal means of expanding its population base. Like other New World countries, Canada adopted immigration naturally, as a rapid means of peopling a critically underpopulated nation with an abundance of uncultivated land, unmined natural resources, and developing industry. In Quebec, only the city of Montreal receives immigrants at a rate comparable to the major anglophone cities. Elsewhere in the province of Quebec, immigration has been negligible.

This contrast has distinguished the francophone and anglophone regions from the beginning of Canadian history. After Nouvelle France became an English possession, Quebec's population growth from about 10,000 citizens in 1760 to over seven million today included about 20,000 immigrants at the end of the 18th century, refugees from the American Revolution, but otherwise the growth has depended largely on Quebec's birthrate. Throughout the 19th century and the first half of the twentieth century, Quebec's birthrate was around 65 per 1,000, one of the highest in

the world. It is now around 13 per 1,000, one of the lowest in Canada. With a declining birthrate and relatively little immigration, Quebec's population is decreasing proportionately in Canada. Instead of increasing immigration in order to compensate for the loss, the Quebec government in 1988 inaugurated cash incentives to mothers who bore three or more children. This 'natalist' policy, unfashionable and unworldly as it seems in an era that extols zero population growth and women's rights, indicates the isolationism that is embedded deeply in Quebec culture.

Though Quebec nationalism appears to be based on linguistic differences, it really goes much deeper. The sociocultural contrasts between societies with significant and continuous immigration and those with stable populations, that is, without significant influxes from outside, are sharp. Belief systems in immigrant societies like anglophone Canada tend to be diffuse because of the importation of diverse creeds, rites, and customs. Ethnicities are more diverse and racial mixing more common. Language is more varied and unstable across generations, with second-language varieties as well as native varieties, different mother tongues in the same household, and loanwords, code-switching and interlanguage. Patriotism is likely to be more diffuse (less focused) and less fervent.

In these respects, Quebec has stood out from the rest of Canada from the beginning. Outside of the city of Montreal, Quebec patriotism is more fervid, ethnic mixing and inter-marriage are uncommon and sometimes openly frowned-upon, and language attitudes are more purist and prescriptive. One of the more extreme branches of Quebec politics is called *pure laine* nationalism, where *pure laine* (literally 'pure wool', a term used on garment labels) stands for ethnic purity in the sense of direct descent from the original *Nouvelle France* settlers. In the rest of Canada and in much of Quebec, this kind of nationalism is viewed as narrow-minded at best and racist at worst. It is a strain of political thought at odds with Canadian openness and tolerance. It has little to do with the official languages themselves, which co-exist by virtue of that general openness and tolerance, as manifested by the extraordinary measures taken by the federal government to protect and elevate the minority language.

The New Truce

Political relations between francophone and anglophone factions in Canada have been relatively calm since the 1995 Referendum. That is consistent with the historical pattern, which is, as I said, cyclic, with periods of calm interrupted by accelerating strife, culminating in a climactic event such as the Referendum. There is no reason to believe that the present calm represents a new stability. In the Federal election in July 2004, the province of Quebec almost unanimously elected members from a party called Bloc Quebecois, which means that they have chosen to be represented in the

national legislature by people whose fealty is first to their own province and only secondarily to the national consensus.

There are, however, signs of change on both sides. In the immediate aftermath of the Referendum, the disappointed separatist Premier of the province openly blamed its defeat on "outsiders and foreigners" in the province. That accusation roused the hitherto relatively quiet group of long-time Quebec citizens whose origins are not *pure laine*, and inspired them to voice their own claims to the province. Their roots in Quebec, they pointed out, went back two or more generations, and their loyalties belonged there as certainly as did anyone else. As these Quebeckers become more assertive, they will undoubtedly provide a more receptive society for new immigrant groups and lead to greater representation of ethnicities in the provincial mix, perhaps proportional to other parts of Canada.

At the same time, there are encouraging signs that the rest of Canada, chastened by the close vote in Quebec, is responding with greater sensitivity to Quebec concerns. Leading up to the Referendum, Canadians in all regions displayed bumper stickers and window signs with the slogan "My Canada includes Quebec." Quebec secessionists were quick to point out that proof of their sincerity must come from deeds not words. Now there is some proof. In the 2001 Census, a greater proportion of Canadians than at any time in the country's history identified themselves as bilingual, where bilingual is defined as knowing French or English well enough to conduct a conversation. The proportion is 17.7 percent, up from 17.0 percent in 1996, just five years before. Historically, in fact, bilingualism has steadily increased for decades. It was, for instance, only 12.8 percent in 1941. Small percentage increases actually represent large numbers with the population growth, so that the bilinguals in 2001 number more than 5.2 million compared to fewer than one million in 1941. One reason for the increase is the spread of French immersion programs in anglophone schools, but we must hope that another reason is the growing awareness in English-speaking Canada of the cultural, national and economic advantages of knowing French.

Increased bilingualism and other developments augur well for the immediate future, but of course they must not only be perpetuated but also reinforced and increased if there is going to be long-term stability. In that sense, relations between francophones and anglophones are really no different now from the way they were in 1763. If the federation is going to work, it must continually renew itself.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Language in Canada, ed. John Edwards (Cambridge University Press, 1998), includes chapters by experts on every aspect discussed here, including the history of French and English people in Canada, federal and provincial language policies, French immersion in education, official multiculturalism, and descriptions of Canadian varieties.