



The Quebec Question in the 21st Century

THE POWER AND LIMITS OF LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Celine Cooper

To the barricades: Demonstrators clash with riot police in Montreal during unruly demonstrations against increases to university tuition fees last spring. *Montreal Gazette*.

Unable to win the ballot questions of change and corruption that were both hijacked by the upstart Coalition Avenir Québec, the Parti Québécois reverted to language and identity politics as never before in the September 4 election. It was an obvious tactic meant to consolidate their hard line base, which was courted by the socialist Québec Solidaire, viewed as a rival sovereigntist party. Playing the identity card was enough to elect a PQ minority government – barely. But as Celine Cooper writes: “The year 2012 also exposed a relatively new set of tensions between the national and emergent globalizing or post-national visions of Quebec society.”

Incapable de s'imposer sur les enjeux du changement et de la corruption, tous deux confisqués par la nouvelle Coalition Avenir Québec, le Parti québécois a mis comme jamais sur les questions de langue et d'identité en vue des élections

du 4 septembre dernier. Une tactique qui visait évidemment à renforcer son aile militante, courtisée par Québec Solidaire, parti socialiste et indépendantiste. Cette carte identitaire lui a permis – d'extrême justesse – de former un gouvernement

minoritaire. Mais comme l'écrit Céline Cooper : « L'année 2012 a aussi révélé des tensions relativement inédites entre une vision nationale de la société québécoise et une vision postnationale tournée vers la mondialisation. »

The election of 2012 was born of one of the most dynamic and divisive social uprisings Quebec has seen since the Quiet Revolution. Over the din of *cac-erolazos* (“casseroles”), streets undulating with the now iconic *carré rouge* (meant to symbolize student debt – that is, squarely in the red), at once seething with violence and exploding with creative energy and community solidarity, the conditions under which the writ was dropped on this election by Premier Jean Charest were extraordinary by any measure. With the adoption of the controversial Bill 78, what had begun as a small scale student strike, (or boycott, depending on your point of view) morphed into a forceful intergenerational movement that hooked into the momentum of the Arab Spring and the global Occupy movement, with their deeper struggles against corruption, the rise of neo-liberalism, corporatization of education, income inequality, and uneven wealth distribution.

It was significant, then, that instead of offering up transparent, courageous leadership on issues related to the economy, corruption, education, the environment, and health care, the Parti Québécois was successful in setting and dominating the parameters of political debate with their flagship policy priorities: language, culture, identity, and sovereignty. It won them the election, but just barely.

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As Pauline Marois took to the stage of the Métropolis in Montreal to deliver her victory speech just before midnight on September 4, it was as the leader of a minority government – only the third in Quebec’s history. Having won 54 out of 125 seats, only four seats separate her party from the newly minted opposition Liberals with 50. In the popular vote, the PQ won only 31.9 percent to the Liberals’ 31.2 percent, while the Coalition Avenir Québec took 19 seats and 27 percent of the vote. The result was hardly a mandate for a third referendum on sovereignty, or anything else in the PQ’s inventory of language and identity issues.

While Marois was addressing the room, even offering a few words in English to reassure an anglophone population shaken by the polemical political rhetoric during the campaign, she was suddenly hustled off stage by her coterie of bodyguards.

A man named Richard Henry Bain had attempted to force his way in the back door of the Métropolis, armed with a semi-





PQ leader Pauline Marois on the campaign trail for the September 4 election, in which her party won a weak minority government, with 54 seats to the Liberals' 50, and 27 for the CAQ. *Montreal Gazette*.

automatic weapon, killing 48 year old sound technician Denis Blanchette and seriously injuring David Courage before his rifle jammed.

In the chaos that ensued as Bain, wearing a blue bathrobe and black balaclava, was being led to the police cruiser he could be heard muttering, and then yelling "Les Anglais se réveillent! Les Anglais se réveillent!" (The English are waking up! The English are waking up!)

It was a chilling moment.

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The issue of Quebec's place within the Canadian federation – grosso modo, the Quebec Question – has been one of the defining themes in Canadian politics for the last 50 years and more, ever since the dawn of the Quiet Revolution in 1960.

In the wake of the 2011 federal election that led to the collapse of Gilles Duceppe's Bloc Québécois and the dramatic NDP sweep of Quebec under the late Jack Layton, many assumed that sovereignty in Quebec was dead or, at the very least, on the decline. The return of the PQ to power has re-animated the Quebec Question and brought it back to the forefront of political debate.

Now that policy makers, politicians, and universities are once again paying attention, it is worth impressing that the Quebec Question – at its core – is not a purely constitutional matter. It never really has been. The issue of Quebec's relationship to Canada is, fundamentally, a complex question of society and the political, economic, and cultural conditions that shape it at any given time.

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Observers would do well to keep in mind that prior to the 1960s French Canadian identity was not defined by territorial parameters but along a tripartite set of ideological and social lines – *la foi, la race, la langue* (faith, race, and language). French Canadians were encouraged by the powerful Roman Catholic Church to coalesce around these themes under a broader banner of *survivance* in the face of perceived external dangers: Anglicization, Protestantism, and later, feminism, urbanization, modernization, and industrialization.

From the moment that processes of secularization began and French Canadian nationalism took a statist turn during the Quiet Revolution, broader constitutional struggles, claims to territory, and social tensions over competing categories of national identity and belonging have played out across the fields of language and linguistic policy. Race and religion were no longer seen as overtly palatable vectors of identity in a new civic (and not ethnic) discourse of a nation constructed, by and large, by the Parti Québécois.

Today, however, the Quebec Question is being influenced by a new set of Canadian and global dynamics that are testing the limits of language and linguistic policy as the ultimate factor in legitimizing the need for sovereign statehood. The processes of globalization, changing patterns of immigration, social media, and the rapid unregulated flow of information are challenging the idea that nations are distinct social, political, and cultural units that must necessarily be bound exclusively to one language.

Like most societies in Western democratic nation states, Quebec is forced to grapple with a new social order shaped by the multiple forces of globalization. Increasing diversity and corresponding demands for recognition or accommodation by ethnolinguistic and ethnocultural minority groups have pushed many citizens (variously situated) to think hard about what identity and belonging to the nation state really mean within the parameters of liberal democracy in the 21st century.

From the 2007 “Hérouxville Affair” in which the town council of a rural farming town adopted a five page “Code of Conduct” for newcomers that included prohibiting the lapidation of women and public prayer, to the landmark Commission on Reasonable Accommodation appointed by Charest and co-chaired by Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor (*Commission de consultations sur les pratiques d’accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles*), to the hot political rhetoric that characterized the 2012 Quebec election – Quebec’s struggles with these broader global challenges must be understood within the historical and political context of its complex colonial past and its internal struggles to reconcile a francophone population that self-identifies as

both the majority dominant culture in Quebec and as a culture under threat within the broader, predominantly English speaking Canadian federation and larger North American continent. Robert Bourassa once called Quebec “an island of French in a sea of English.”

One of the key tensions is that Quebec is facing a large demographic shift vis-à-vis its aging population and low birth-rate among “old stock” francophones of French European origin (the so-called francophones *de souche*) and high rates of immigration to balance this dwindling population. The buried issue of the campaign – yet arguably the most critical issue facing Quebec as it moves forward over the next 30 or 40 years – is its aging population and the dire need to attract and retain immigrants.

Although its minority status will limit the extent to which the PQ will be able to push through their most militant policies, they have made no secret of their strategy to provoke constitutional crises with Ottawa in order to create the so-called “winning conditions” it seeks to hold a referendum on independence.

If the Quebec election of 2012 is any indication, these constitutional crises will be provoked across the terrains of language, culture, and identity. The PQ’s proposed Charter of Secularism (prohibiting all religious symbolism except the crucifix from the public sphere) and extension of the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101) to CEGEPs, prohibiting francophone and allophone students from attending English language colleges, and requiring francisation certificates of businesses with more than 10 employees as opposed to more than 50 at present, seem almost strategically designed



The banging of casseroles and other kitchenware became a familiar sight and sound in Montreal neighbourhoods during the tumultuous spring of 2012. *Montreal Gazette*.



Former Premier Jean Charest stormed down the home stretch and made the election incredibly close, turning over the Quebec Liberal party in very good shape for its leadership campaign. *Montreal Gazette*.

to bump up against the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and provoke legal challenges. Though Marois offered no details in an inaugural address to the National Assembly, she later told Radio-Canada: “I said we would table a new Charter of the French Language. This new charter can consist of different parts, and could also include the CEGEPs. It’s not excluded, to the contrary, it’s expected.”

At a press conference midway through the campaign, Marois also resurrected Bill 195 (the so-called “Identity Bill” that was tabled by the PQ and voted down in the legislature in 2007) and stated that anglophones, allophones, and Aborigines who did not pass a state issued French test would be prohibited from running for public office or financially contributing to political parties. Marois later retreated and clarified that this would only be applied to new Quebecers who did not speak French. Regardless, this would effectively create a two tiered citizenship model where rights to participate in the political process are parsed out according to fluency in the French language.

Caricatured ideas about language and identity in Quebec may still have purchase on internal political markets, but they are dangerously out of step with the new reality. As public spaces in Quebec – including businesses, schools, health care facilities, and so forth – become increasingly globalized, the unilingual agenda at the core of the *projet de francisation* is bumping up against the reality of greater linguistic diversity, particularly in Montreal.

The stark reality is that the power of the Quebec state apparatus and its attendant institutions to maintain unilingual public spaces through language legislation such as Bill 101 is being defied by new global processes. Standardized, institutionalized ideas about the French language and its role in defining the nation, based

on fixed ideas of what it means to be a Quebecer (the highly fraught *nous*), are being challenged by unregulated social media, new forms of linguistic code switching practices, cultural expression, accents, and the different kinds of bodies, values, and histories that produce and circulate them. On Facebook and Twitter, platforms that did not exist even a decade ago, people communicate in the language of their choice.

That the “French fact” in Quebec exists alongside a multilingual fact in Montreal is unsettling precisely because it challenges the way Quebecers have been taught to approach ideas about language, identity, culture, and nation over the last half century.

Perhaps as a means to neutralize (or capitalize on) these tensions, the new PQ government has merged the portfolios of international affairs, Montreal, and anglophones and put a star candidate, Jean-François Lisée, in charge. A former adviser to PQ leader Jacques Parizeau and speechwriter for Lucien Bouchard, a journalist in Washington covering international affairs, the former head of the Centre d’études et de recherches internationale (CERIUM) at the University of Montreal, and a regular contributor to *L’actualité magazine* (including playing a key role in the sensational April 2012 edition “Ici, on parle English” that raised a caricatured spectre of the future of the French language in Montreal), it is perhaps safe to assume that he is one of the key architects in crafting the new meta-nationalism of the PQ.

Lisée’s driving issue has been not merely “francizing” Montreal, but keeping it a francophone majority city. Lisée has announced the government’s intention to develop policy – including possible financial incentives and housing subsidies – designed to encourage more francophone families to stay on the island instead of moving to the suburbs. Lisée

has also indicated a desire to change immigration policy in order to privilege francophones (in his words, immigrants who “live in French”) instead of those who have mastered it as a second language.

In a recent interview, Lisée stated that a French immigrant from Bordeaux is worth more to Quebec than an immigrant from Shanghai who speaks French as a second language. At the recent 14th summit of *la Francophonie* held in the Congo shortly after his election and appointment to the ministerial post, he referred to the battle for French in Montreal as a “combat”, while chastising Gabon’s President Ali Bongo for announcing his plans to follow in Rwanda’s footsteps by promoting English as a second language in their efforts to promote economic partnerships and create opportunities for its people by ensuring its citizens have a working knowledge of English, the global lingua franca.

Data from the 2011 census released in late October only stirred the debate. The census showed that the percentage of mother tongue francophones on the island of Montreal declined to 48.5 percent in 2011 from 49.8 percent in 2006. However, the numbers also showed that from 2006 to 2011, the number of Montreal area residents who speak French plus another language at home increased by 37.5 per cent (90,000 people). The statistics show that across Quebec – including Montreal – an increasing number of allophones are speaking French at home, indicating that French has surpassed English as the language to which newcomers are turning.

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For Education Minister Pierre Duchesne, former Quebec bureau chief of Radio-Canada, this was a call to linguistic arms. “We’re a nationalist government that will do everything to promote this language”, he said. “It takes a Charter of the French Language that’s powerful enough to protect French in North America.”

If the PQ wants to succeed in these hardline linguistic endeavors as a means of legitimizing their “national project” in the 21st century, it will have to build a solid case for Quebec exceptionalism.

Globally, we are witnessing significant geopolitical reconfigurations as power migrates from the north and west to the

south and east, where emerging economic and trade markets in China, India, Russia, and Brazil are overtaking Europe and the US. In Canada and around the world, language has emerged as a highly sought after resource in these new interconnected webs of social and economic markets. John Manley, former federal Liberal finance minister and now CEO of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, recently proposed that it may be time for a national debate on how to promote new language skills – particularly in Spanish, Chinese, and Indian languages – in order to prepare upcoming generations for the changing job market and bolster Canada’s place in the new global economy.


The PQ will need to justify to Quebecers how and why Quebec’s exceptionalism enables it to target the linguistic diversity and multilingualism of Montreal – more than ever a resource in today’s interconnected world – as a deficit rather than an asset in the name of a particular national project.

Despite these global shifts, the bi- and multilingualism of Montreal are not seen as a human resource asset, a source of comparative advantage, or an index of inclusivity, but interpreted instead by the PQ as a threat to the francophone majority. The PQ will need to justify to Quebecers how and why Quebec’s exceptionalism enables it to target the linguistic diversity and multilingualism of Montreal – more than ever a resource in today’s interconnected world – as a deficit rather than an asset in the name of a particular national project.

Polemics notwithstanding, the Quebec election and the *Printemps érable* that preceded it actually brought into relief a tremendous spectrum of competing visions for Quebec society and its place in Canada and in the world.

It exposed, among other things, the tensions between a range of federalist and sovereigntist positions, between the *Lucides* and the *Solidaires*, neo-liberal and Marxist socialist ideologies. The passing of the controversial Bill 78 alone provided us with a snapshot of the coterminous relationship between authoritarianism and anarchy that always seems to simmer just under the surface in Quebec.

Perhaps most poignantly for policy and political leaders who are wondering how to re-engage with the Quebec Question in the 21st century, the year 2012 also exposed a relatively new set of tensions between the national and emergent globalizing or post-national visions of Quebec society.

How the PQ chooses to navigate these tensions across the terrain of language and identity politics will speak volumes in any language. 

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