Quebec and the French Revolution

Michel Tétu

In French-speaking Canada, the Revolution was at first greeted enthusiastically. In the spring of 1789 some said it was the most significant event since the birth of Christ. However, with the "horrors of the Revolution" (as the expression went), opinion changed quickly becoming anti- and even counter-revolutionary. Although conservatism and clericalism emerged stronger, the revolutionary spirit did not die. It resurged periodically in the 19th and 20th centuries, up to and including the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and Quebec's full-fledged entry into "la Francophonie".

When France ceded New France to England by the *Treaty of Paris* in 1763, the colony numbered about 65,000 inhabitants. The population was doubling every 25 years as a result of the extremely high birth rate of the *Canadiens*, the numbers of French citizens who had gone back to France and then returned to Canada, and the beginnings of English immigration.

By the time of the Revolution, the population of Canada was 140,000 including 120,000 *Canadiens*[1] in 132 municipalities. The English victory and the *Treaty of Paris* created a shockwave. No one had the slightest notion as to why France had abandoned such a great country. Scornfully the people blamed Mme Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress. They blamed Bigot, the Intendant of New France, who had failed miserably in his duty of making the colony turn a profit. They blamed Montcalm, the Governor, who was unable to defend his city during the famous siege that cost him his life. The priests blamed the people, saying it was just punishment for the sins, hoping in this way to reclaim their flock.

The situation was traumatic and overwhelming. There was no longer any point in continuing to demand greater independence from the motherland; measures had to be taken to deal with England and make life acceptable on Canadian soil.

Despite commonly held opinion, there was considerable coming and going between France and Canada after 1763. Although French citizens could not enter Canada, *Canadiens* – that is, French citizens born in Canada – could go to and from France as they pleased. Many shuttled back and forth to settle their affairs. News of what was happening in France was, therefore, readily available.

The American Revolution

When the Americans rebelled against the English, the *Canadiens* viewed the situation much less sympathetically than might have been expected. Although the *Canadiens* had been demanding a considerable degree of independence from France, and the Americans were rebelling against the English for the same reasons, after the *Treaty of Paris* the *Canadiens* had no desire to get involved in another battle. They needed time to recover. The Americans tried in vain to get the *Canadiens* involved, for several reasons. First, they had become fairly independent under Britain: they had kept their religion, their language, their currency, and their customs. The English, who ruled from a distance, did not interfere very

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much. Secondly, they were afraid of a new war; they needed to regroup. Thirdly, they were monarchists rather than republicans, and fourthly, they were encouraged by the Church to remain loyal to England. Monsignor Briand, Bishop of Quebec, issued his famous pastoral warning of May 22, 1775 against anyone who failed in his oath of allegiance.

Two American armies led by Arnold and Montgomery invaded Canada and laid siege to Quebec in late December 1775. However, the hostile attitude of the populace and the arrival of an English fleet in the spring made them withdraw.

LaFayette, Rochambeau and de Grasse came from France to help the Americans. In 1781, they had an army of 8,000 men and LaFayette suggested that Washington invade the colony in the name of France, convinced that the *Canadiens* would then rally to the cause. However, Washington refused, not wishing to create a troublesome neighbour for the young American republic.

LaFayette returned to France where he played an important role in the French Revolution and Rochambeau left for the West Indies, where the French situation was worsening rapidly. In 1783, England recognized the independence of the United States and the northern border was defined. About 5,800 loyalists and 800 regulars crossed the border to settle in the Upper St. Lawrence. They would soon require their own district, as they did not wish to live under French civil law or the seigneurial system.

The Beginnings of the French Revolution

Relatively happy with their fate, treated with consideration by England and enjoying a fair amount of independence, the *Canadiens* nevertheless applauded the beginnings of the French Revolution. They loved the king but believed his entourage was corrupt and that order would be established in France. Grand ideals would triumph, and this would have a positive effect on their situation in North America. The type of government the *Canadiens* wanted for France was a constitutional monarchy. When the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* became known in Canada, it evoked great enthusiasm, as can be seen in this article from *La Gazette de Québec*:

> ...today there can be no doubt: this is not a revolt, but a true revolution. Two events that occurred within three weeks of each other in August of last year make it possible to state that France will never again be what she was two years ago: an absolute monarchy.
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> Those two events — the renunciation by the nobility of all its privileges (August 4, 1789), and the Declaration of the Rights of Man (August 26) — constitute the definitive turning point of the Revolution.
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> By agreeing to give up all its privileges (tax exemptions, feudal rights, and so on), the nobility has yielded to the will of the people, who wish to conduct their own affairs, no longer accepting the social and economic inequalities that are based only on accidents of birth or the good will of the king.
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> It is precisely this rejection of inequalities that has been transformed into the main foundation for a new society, in the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man. A tribute to the great British Magna Carta, the American Declaration of Independence, and the philosophic spirit of Rousseau, this document constitutes the synthesis of a new spirit that will doubtless mark future generations....
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> If, to these elements, the affirmation of the principle of freedom of opinion and the press are added, we can glimpse something of the path France has been following for the past two years. Of course, none of this has been easy; the horrors of civil war and bloody revolution still exist. The cause of the Revolution has nonetheless definitely succeeded in destroying the structures of the ancien régime; present and future problems for France will involve establishing new institutions and meeting the urgent needs that the representatives of the people have given themselves the power to solve.

Thus, from 1789 to 1792, the tone in which newspapers discussed the Revolution was uniform. Samuel Neilson, in Quebec, was absolutely euphoric. Fleury Mesplet was proudly revolutionary.

In 1791, Britain decided to divide Canada in two in order to allow the English, who were in the majority in the west (Upper Canada, now Ontario) and the French, in the east (Lower Canada, now Quebec), to live separately, but faithful to England. Lower Canada at the time was 85 percent Francophone. Each province was given an elected assembly, an appointed legislative council, and a lieutenant governor. A Governor would represent the executive. Two peoples were given recognition; each was to be able to develop in accordance with its aspirations and govern itself in accordance with its own nature.

"The British government wanted at all costs to avoid new tensions and confrontations. It was vital that the Revolution not reach Canada, even if this meant applying parliamentary principles to the colony."

Everything said publicly about the Revolution in Canada at the time was therefore positive. Only some private correspondence revealed mixed emotions or even opposition to the Revolution. In public, opinion was unanimous.

The Turning Point

At the end of 1792, however, things began to change. For some time it had been thought that the Revolution was too

violent and brutal. In a Carmelite convent, priests and nuns were massacred, two of whom were *Canadiens*. Indignation and incredulity spread across the ocean.

> Since the beginning of 1792, almost everywhere in France, bands of sans-culottes have been amusing themselves by hanging and massacring priests and nuns.... on September 2 and 3 over 1000 prisoners, among them almost 250 priests, were massacred after a mock trial. ... The Revolution, which until now had maintained a certain dignity, by this bloodbath has lost all decency. God knows where and when it will stop.

In May 1793, the colony learned of both the death of Louis XVI (January 21) and the war between France and England (February 1). At that moment, everything changed.

Now the revolutionaries were nothing less than murderers. In a few days public opinion among *Canadiens* did a complete about face. On April 24, Lieutenant Governor Clarke proclaimed that the population was at war with the Revolution. He did not dare to ask the people to go to war against France, as he believed this would provoke division, but he was certain that everyone would follow him if he declared war against the Revolution.

The elected bodies therefore assured the governor of their indignation against the country which had guillotined its king. On November 9, Monsignor Denaut reminded the faithful of the loyalty they owed the king of England. He even listed six reasons in favour of compliance with the established order:

> First, because by the capitulations of Quebec in 1759 and Montreal in 1760, and still more by the peace treaty of 1763, the ties that bound them to France were entirely broken, and all the loyalty and obeisance they owed to the king of France they now owe to His Majesty the King of England.
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> Secondly, because the oath taken by them or their peers to the King of England when this country was conquered binds them in such a way that they could not violate it without being grievously culpable toward God himself.
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> Thirdly, because in addition to the strong obligation that results from such an oath, there is the conduct — full of humanity, gentleness, and beneficence — that the British government has always displayed toward them.
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> Fourthly, because the constant protection accorded to their Holy Faith by this same government, should make them desire ardently never to fall under the dominion of any other country.
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> Fifthly, because the spirit of religion, of submission and attachment to one's king which was once the glory of the Kingdom of France, has given way over the last few years to a spirit of irreligion, independence, anarchy and parricide which has not only resulted in the death or exile of honourable French citizens but has taken their virtuous king to the scaffold and justly incurred the indignation of all the European powers; and that the most unfortunate occurrence that could happen in Canada would be to welcome these revolutionaries.
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> Sixthly, because, in the present circumstances, the government is not the only party interested in keeping the French out of this province; any good subject, any true patriot, any good Catholic who wishes to preserve his freedom, laws, moral standards, and religion is also particularly and personally interested.

From that time on, there was practically a holy war against the Revolution. This open battle was everyone's business; it would continue under the Directory, the Consulate, and the Empire until 1815.

In 1794 the English numbered 25,000, and the *Canadiens*, 150,000. The former were afraid that the Revolution, despite everything, would reach Canada and gain ground there. They also feared the United States and learned to use a new tactic against the Revolution: psychological warfare.

There were constant reminders of the deaths of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette since the *Canadiens* were actually very strong royalists. They swore an oath to the king of England but they were still faithful to the king of France.

There were also constant reminders of the massacres of priests, and nobles and the ransacking of property. The *Canadiens* were attached to their seigneurs and the seigneurial system. The seigneurs were not at all like the feudal lords in France; most often they were *Canadiens* who had been given a parcel of land to manage.

The English took exceptional measures against foreigners, and passed laws to prevent anyone coming recently from France from entering Canada by sea, or land by way of the United States. The borders were sealed and watched carefully.

Furthermore, the fear of the French fleet was used against the populace. A French fleet had indeed mutinied in Santo Domingo and headed for the United States. One of the purposes of this operation had been to reach Quebec and bring the Revolution to North America. The English exploited the situation, regularly instilling fear into the populace with stories of the horrible atrocities that would be committed by the mutineers.

Lastly, they encouraged spying. Suspicions were aroused, plots invented — there was fear on all sides. A few incidents that occurred between 1794 and 1796 were exploited to the full.

In 1797 a spy was finally captured by the English — one David McLane. There was a major trial, at the end of which McLane was hanged. Fortunately he was American, not French. That might have been going too far. An American could be hanged, even at great expense. The sentence had its intended effect: the English strengthened their hold on the clergy, which became fiercely counter-revolutionary. Several *Te Deum* would be sung to celebrate the victories of the English over Napoleon in 1798, 1802, 1804, and 1812.

Clericalism and Counter Revolution

The arrival of French immigrants, especially French priests, helped England in its efforts. In 1798 a considerable number of French immigrants arrived from England, where they had taken refuge. Several ships brought French nobles, led by Mr. Joseph de Puisaye. The latter and about 300 companions established themselves in the Toronto area, with the aim of creating a French settlement. Although the area had once been French the English were now in the majority and these immigrants would almost all return to France after the *Treaty of Amiens* in 1802.

The case was completely different, however, for the 51 carefully chosen French priests who came to Quebec between 1792 and 1815. Most were Sulpicians. They settled around Lac St-Pierre, near Trois-Rivières; in fact, the area would even be called "La Petite France". At the time there were only 140 priests in all of Quebec, so the arrival of 51 more marked the second foundation of the Church in Canada.

The priests were men of worth and reputation. One of them was the brother of Louis XVI's first minister. These priests would stay with the *Canadiens*, and not leave to convert the Indians, as had happened before. They also brought with them many beautiful things, such as 151 paintings dating from the 16th to the 18th century. These would be distributed among several churches and give birth to a new kind of holy art in Canada, a pictorial school.

The Church was extremely pleased. With the help of the French priests it would create the myth (one that the English would perpetuate), that the conquest of Canada by Britain before the Revolution had been providential. The English victory became an act of providence that allowed the *Canadiens* to save their souls and escape the sacrilegious, anticlerical and regicidal French Revolution. The *Canadiens* would accept this relatively well because they also would think that they had been able to save their property.

> ***"Thus, after the French Revolution had roused the enthusiasm of Canadiens by means of a budding parliamentary system and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, it ended up mainly serving the cause of the English, who took advantage of it to reinforce their power ,and assisted the Church, which then took over the destiny of Quebec for the entire 19th century."***

Some *Canadiens* did resist. Many realized, especially the most educated, that the English were taking advantage of the Revolution to change the spirit of agreements and dominate them completely. From 1791 on, although they applauded the new law, they quickly realized that it was better in appearance than in substance. Protests were quick in coming. In May 1794, when the English established a militia on the pretext of defending the country, the *Canadiens* refused to register: they were afraid of conscription. In 1796 the English wanted to pass a public works act and force each *Canadien* to maintain the road in front of his house. The *Canadiens* refused to build their portion of road. From this point on, all the rumours circulated by the English about Napoleon's fleets or French fleets from the United States were no longer entirely groundless: several *Canadiens* turned them to advantage, and others would have been happy to see them become a reality. A few even circulated a petition to ask Napoleon to help Canada against the English, but it was signed by only 12 *Canadiens*.

The Nineteenth Century

Just as certain sentiments that cannot easily be expressed are often hidden within, the revolutionary spirit was not dead: it lived within the spirit of the *Canadiens*.

Certain ideas, that had originated with the French Revolution and had been enriched by contact with the United States and the effects of the American Revolution, would mark the entire 19th century.

In 1834 *Le Parti Canadien*, which had become the *Parti des Patriotes*, obtained 77 percent of the vote. Headed by Louis-Joseph Papineau, the party tried in vain to persuade the British governor that the Assembly which had been established in Lower Canada should be a completely responsible government. The governor then refused even to convene the Assembly. The *Canadiens*, in response, organized assemblies at the village, county and provincial levels. An Assembly met at St-Charles, and faced with the British government's refusal to meet any of its demands, decided to take up arms. Quebec rebelled, and the Patriotes won a first victory at St-Denis. The English army then organized and crushed the insurgents, whose rebellions were then systematically repressed, and whose leaders fled to the United States. Many of the Patriotes died; several others were imprisoned. The Rebellion had failed.

Papineau, who had not advocated armed revolt, was the first to take refuge in the United States in 1837. Robert Nelson followed, and others after him. On February 28, 1838, at the head of 300 men, Nelson, proclaimed the Republic of Lower Canada and, hoping for aid from the United States, crossed the border to recapture Canada. These revolutionaries were crushed and the English, wanting to prevent any repetition of the revolt, repressed it brutally. Several villages were burned and sacked. One thousand

people were thrown in prison, 108 of whom would be prosecuted and 99 hanged.

The Church excommunicated the Patriotes, although they were rehabilitated in the 20th century. Since 1960 the figure of the Patriote, with his toque, long woollen sash, pipe and rifle, has become a sort of folk hero. The Rebellion of the Patriotes did not succeed, yet the ideals of liberty would seem to have produced a movement with a considerable following in the last century. However, it was not until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s that significant changes began to occur.

The Quiet Revolution and Beyond

Following his victory in the 1960 Quebec election Jean Lesage led a Liberal administration which took over health, education and even social services for which the Church had been responsible for two hundred years. Another important event was the nationalization of Hydro-Quebec, the asbestos industry, and natural resources, as well as the greater democratization of Quebec society.

Another important change was taking place. The term *Canadien* had gradually fallen out of use. In 1967 when General De Gaulle made his triumphal tour of the "Chemin du Roy" he was speaking to the French of Canada or French-Canadians. But the Quiet Revolution was already in the process of giving rise to a new Quebecois identity with a new mentality and a manifestation of the revolutionary spirit in poetry and song. This Revolution was indeed "quiet". When the *Front de Libération du Québec* (FLQ) assassinated Pierre Laporte in 1970, Quebeceurs were horrified, just as they had been when the French Revolution turned violent.

In 1976 the Parti Québécois came to office on the platform of independence for the province but it modified its ambitions when, in a 1980 referendum, it failed to obtain enough backing to make independence a reality.

The passion for independence cooled after the failure of the referendum but since then Quebec has played an increasing role in the international Francophone movement and the organization of the second Francophone Summit held in Quebec in September 1987.

French President François Mitterrand had chaired the first Summit for Heads of State and Government in Paris in February 1986. Eighteen months after the first summit, it was Quebec's turn to welcome the forty Heads of State and Government. At the instigation of the province of Quebec (a remarkable fact at the time, and one which has not been emphasized enough), a *Declaration of Solidarity* was issued at the end of the Summit.

This Declaration, which passed relatively unnoticed, draws once more upon the spirit that was behind the French Revolution. The community no longer wishes to be seen as revolving around France, with the other Francophone countries on a slightly lower plane, a kind of *sous-France*, as it was once called by the late Congolese poet Tchicaya U Tam'si. The Heads of Government wish to be collectively responsible:

> Recognizing the importance of our *freely constituted association*, in which, as *equal partners*, we are bound by a common desire to contribute to a renewed equilibrium in our relations and inspired by the use, to varying degrees, of the French language as a tool for learning, dialogue, development and innovation....

After two centuries of struggle, after a Quiet Revolution, and after a referendum on independence it is perhaps within the framework of "la Francophonie" that Quebecois will best be able to realize the spirit of the French Revolution.■

Notes

1 The area today known as Quebec was, at the time of the Revolution called Canada and the inhabitants, Francophone for the most part, referred to themselves as *Canadiens*, and to their British conquerors as the English. This would continue for the entire first half of the 19th century. The name Quebec would not really be used until after Confederation.