

# Mini-Portrait of the Members of the National Assembly

Gaston Deschênes

Who are the men and women who represent us in our legislative assemblies? This question has interested social scientists for a long time. In Quebec, many analyses have been done on this subject over the last twenty years, but they have often been based on unverified sources such as candidates' biographies or statements made to the chief returning officer. Furthermore, it is often difficult to compare the results of these studies, since the categories are imprecise and vary from one study to another. In spite of these problems, and within the limitations imposed by them, this article is an attempt to briefly characterize the "typical" member of the Quebec National Assembly. Is his mini-portrait much different from members of other legislatures?

The age distribution of members of the National Assembly does not fully correspond to that of the electors, much less that of the entire population. There is nothing unusual about this. At the moment, the "under twenty-fives" are not formally represented in the National Assembly. At the other end of the age spectrum, people aged forty-five and over constitute forty-two per cent of the membership of the Assembly, but twenty-five per cent of the total population.

Nevertheless, today's member of the National Assembly is younger than the member of former times. Although the average age was 43 in 1981, about the same as in 1867, these figures are not significant unless life expectancy is taken into account, with the result that a forty-year-old today is "younger" than a forty-year-old of a hundred years ago.

## Average age (1867-1981)<sup>1</sup>

| Year        | 1867 | 1875 | 1904 | 1936 | 1948 | 1965 | 1975 | 1976 | 1981 |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Average age | 42   | 43   | 46   | 45   | 48   | 49   | 45   | 42   | 43   |

The National Assembly now has eight women members, representing 5.6% of the membership; five of them belong to the majority. Before 1976, only two women had been members of the National Assembly. The first, Madame Claire Kirkland-Casgrain, was elected on December 14, 1961, in the riding her father had represented from 1939 to 1960.

*Gaston Deschênes is head of the Research Service of the Library of the Quebec legislature. This article is based on information in Le Député québécois which will soon be published in a revised edition.*

Francophone Quebecers now hold 87% of the seats in the National Assembly. This has not always been the situation. The proportion of Francophones was 70% in 1867. The drop from 1976 to 1981 can be partly explained by the recent election of eight members born outside Quebec (three in Italy and one in each of Mauritius, Great Britain, Holland, Greece and Ontario). Only three members of the Assembly of 1976 were born outside Quebec, including one born in Ottawa. Although this phenomenon is new in our era, it is not unprecedented, since in 1876 nine of the sixty-five members (14%) were born outside Quebec (two in each of England, Scotland and Ireland, and one each in France, the United States and Ontario).

## Members Whose Mother Tongue is French (1876-1981)<sup>2</sup>

| Year         | 1867 | 1900 | 1940 | 1976 | 1981 |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Francophones | 70%  | 80%  | 90%  | 94%  | 87%  |

## Education and Profession of Members

According to statistics published on the subject, the educational level of the members has increased considerably. As Robert Boily remarked in 1976, Quebec was governed by educated people, the majority of whom had a university education and the overwhelming majority a secondary school education.<sup>3</sup> This tendency had become more marked as the years have passed: the percentage of members having a post-secondary education has risen from twenty-five in 1876 to seventy-three in 1981 and varies very little from one party to another.

## Educational Level (1876-1981)<sup>4</sup>

|      | Post-secondary % | Secondary % | Elementary % | Unknown % |
|------|------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|
| 1867 | 25.0             | 38.0        | 37.0         | —         |
| 1904 | 58.1             | 27.1        | 8.1          | 6.6       |
| 1912 | 49.3             | 32.3        | 9.8          | 8.5       |
| 1936 | 46.1             | 21.8        | 21.8         | 10.3      |
| 1944 | 48.2             | 23.1        | 20.8         | 7.7       |
| 1966 | 66.5             | 27.8        | 1.9          | 3.8       |
| 1976 | 73.6             | 23.6        | 2.8          | —         |
| 1981 | 73.0             | 26.0        | 0.3          | —         |

Owing to confusion of the terms "profession" and "occupation", vagueness of sources and poorly defined categories, few

satisfactory studies on the professions of members of the Assembly have been done in Quebec. Until studies based on more precise biographical data are available, the general observations to be derived from the following table and the studies from which it has been taken will have to suffice.<sup>5</sup>

#### Members' professions (1867-1981)<sup>6</sup>

|  | 1867<br>%           | 1904<br>% | 1944<br>% | 1962<br>% | 1976<br>% | 1981<br>% |
|--|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Farmers  | 20.0                | 17.5      | 11.2      | 7.3       | 4.0       | 3.0       |
| Workers  | 0.0                 | 0.0       | 5.6       | 2.1       | 1.0       | 0.0       |
| Businessmen,<br>manufacturers<br>and merchants | 19.0                | 19.0      | 19.1      | 24.2      | 16.0      | 13.0      |
| Employees in<br>the services<br>sector         | 0.0                 | 1.3       | 5.6       | 9.4       | 6.0       | 4.0       |
| Public<br>administrators                       | (category not used) |           |           |           | 8.0       | 20.0      |
| Professionals                                  | 61.0                | 58.1      | 39.3      | 55.7      | 66.0      | 58.5      |
| Unknown  | 0.0                 | 4.0       | 19.1      | 1.0       | 0.0       | 2.0       |

As Jean Hamelin (1964), Robert Boily (1967) and Vincent Lemieux (1969) noted, the representation of the working class and farmers is negligible; this is a constant in the history of Quebec, Canada and other countries. In Quebec, the presence of farmers has been declining since 1867.

The proportion of businessmen (considered separately from administrators in the public and parapublic sectors) shows a slight increase, and the figures for the employees in the services sector testify to the expansion of this sector within our economy.

There remains the large category of professionals, whose relative stability (except for the date for 1944, which can be explained by a lack of information) conceals a profound change. Indeed, Boily's studies have already shown that, from 1867 until the beginning of the 20th century, lawyers, notaries and doctors were practically the only representatives of the liberal professions in the Assembly, and accounted for sixty per cent of the membership. Later on, professions such as agronomy, veterinary medicine and accounting were represented.<sup>7</sup> While studying the period from 1939 to 1966, Vincent Lemieux observed certain changes in the composition of the Assembly, including "a slight tendency toward greater occupational diversity"<sup>8</sup>, whereas for the same period Hamelin put a figure of 35% on the number of members who belonged to the Bar, the Chamber of Notaries and the College of Physicians.<sup>9</sup> Today, these traditional professions account for 37% of the entire category of professionals and 22% of the membership of the Assembly.

A recent study by Marc-André Bédard<sup>10</sup> confirms the preceding observations: the generally marginal position of farmers, in spite of a noteworthy presence around 1900; the almost total absence of workers; the slow emergence of employees in the services sector and of semi-professionals (a manifestation of the growth of the tertiary sector); the enduring stability and recent decline of the group of owners of small and medium-size busi-

nesses; the stability of the professionals; and the weak representation of big business. This study, however, gives much more precise information on the composition of the main groups. Owners of small and medium-size businesses continue to be dominated by the commercial sector. Among the professionals, lawyers and notaries have lost their former predominance, and the sixties witnessed the appearance of professionals in education, administration and the human sciences (teachers, communicators, economists, political scientists, historians and others).

## The Political Careers of Members

Traditionally, experience in municipal politics was a decisive advantage for the aspiring member. In 1875, more than 50% of the members were or had been mayors or councillors on the municipal scene. This figure then dropped to about 30%, and during the most recent general elections it stood at 10%. Quebec members tend not to have had long careers in provincial politics. Only 9% of the members elected in 1981 had stood for election to the Assembly before 1970.

Since he is younger and less experienced politically than his counterparts in the past, the member elected in 1981 has little parliamentary experience. There has been a marked trend toward a younger Assembly over the past twenty years. Leaving aside the years in which the government majority was maintained, the rate of replacement of members of the Assembly rose from 30% after the 1960 election to 62% for the 1976 election. From 1956 to 1981, the proportion of members with six years or more of parliamentary experience fell from 57% to 19%.

#### Parliamentary Experience of Members (1956-1981)

|      | No experience<br>% | 1 to 5 years<br>% | 6 years or more<br>% |
|------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1956 | 26                 | 17                | 57                   |
| 1960 | 38                 | 26                | 36                   |
| 1962 | 23                 | 37                | 40                   |
| 1966 | 51                 | 20                | 29                   |
| 1970 | 52                 | 22                | 26                   |
| 1973 | 35                 | 42                | 23                   |
| 1976 | 62                 | 13                | 25                   |
| 1981 | 33                 | 48                | 19                   |

The parliamentary experience of members elected in 1981 varies according to political party, but the contrast is not as striking as in 1976. The opposition has many more members without parliamentary experience, and the government has more members with from one to five years' experience.

## Conclusion

As a number of other analysts in Quebec and elsewhere have already pointed out, it seems clear that the National Assembly is not, and has never really been, socially representative of the Quebec population. Whatever variables are selected – age, sex, ethnic origins, education or profession – a major discrepancy is to be found. The elector, to borrow Léo Hamon's description of the French, "is not especially concerned about any analogy between himself and the person he chooses as his elected representative."<sup>11</sup>

This phenomenon has yet to be explained within the Quebec context, nor has that of the turnover of members of the Assembly, which occurred at a rate of more than 50% in three of the

last five elections. Does the explanation lie in the disappearance of the career parliamentarian or in the arrival of a new generation?

## Notes

1. Sources: 1867 and 1875, Jean Hamelin, *Les premières années du parlementarisme québécois*, pp 26 and 131; 1936, Hamelin, "Commentaires", in *Nos hommes politiques*, pp 28-31; 1904-1962, André Gélinas, *Les parlementaires et l'administration au Québec*, pp 39-40; 1965 and 1975, Jean Bernard et al, *Mise à jour des caractéristiques* p 2; 1976 and 1981, calculations by the author.
2. Source: 1876-1940, Robert Boily, "Les hommes politiques du Québec" in *Revue d'histoire d'Amérique française* (1967), p 604; 1976 and 1981, calculations by the author.
3. Robert Boily, *loc. cit.*, p 604. The author points out that French Canadians constituted 60% of the Members of the House of Lower Canada (in 1792) but formed 90% of the population.
4. Sources: 1867, Boily, *loc. cit.*, pp 609-610; 1904-1912, André Gélinas, p 41; 1936-1966, Vincent Lemieux, *Quatre élections provinciales au Québec*, p 118; 1976 and 1981.
5. We have borrowed the categories used by André Gélinas, while recognizing that they are not perfect. Technicians and employees in transportation services, for example, do not fit category III, but cannot easily be placed in category II. Gélinas includes journalists and teachers among professionals, whereas Lemieux (*op. cit.*, p 116) included them among the semi-professionals along with the technicians. In order to take into account a relatively recent phenomenon, we have also introduced a category of "public administrators".
6. Sources: 1867, Hamelin, *op. cit.*, pp 26-32; 1904-1962, Gélinas, *op. cit.*, p 45; 1976 and 1981, calculations by the author.
7. Boily, *loc. cit.*, p 612. The author risked the prediction that these traditional professions "will always account for at least 70% of the group of professionals": in 1981, they constitute less than 40% of this group.
8. Lemieux, *loc. cit.*, pp 112-113.
9. Jean Hamelin, *loc. cit.*, p 28; In 1962, Gélinas notes the presence of 33 of these professionals (62% of the entire category and 35% of the membership of the Assembly) (*op. cit.*, p 44).
10. Marc-André Bédard, "La profession des députés (1867-1890)", *Bulletin de la Bibliothèque*, 11, 1 (May 1981), pp 31-54.
11. See "La profession parlementaire" in the *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 13, 4 (1961), p 583.