

Hear no Canadian Unity;
See no Canadian Unity?
**Examining the Prospects of Quebec Secession &
Renewed Canadian National Identity**

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With 49.4% of Quebecers voting on October 30, 1995 to separate from Canada, the prospects of the dissolution of the Canadian state have never been greater. With an apparently strong increase in the support for Quebec sovereignty, it seems inevitable that Quebec will one day secede from Canada, finally resolving the Quebec Question once and for all. Appearances aside, however, nothing in human history is 'inevitable,' especially in the case of Quebec. In particular, before establishing a particular conclusion to a historical event, it is necessary to examine the progression leading to its possibility and the underlying circumstances that could ultimately lead to it. To begin, establishing a theoretical framework is vital in order to understand the circumstances that have resulted in differences between English and French-speaking Canadians. With a significant divergence in the interpretation of Canadian history between Quebecers and the rest of Canada, clearly understanding the significance of this aspect of the Quebec issue is important in understanding the basic divisions between Canada's linguistic units. Also, the unpredictable and unintentional aspect of actions by politicians and individuals, particularly by the leaders in government, is also an area to investigate to judge the inevitability of separation. Realizing as well the deafening nature of the national unity debate is significant in charting the course of the future of Canada. By exploring these areas that, as it will be argued, laid the foundation for the 1995 Quebec Referendum, as well as examining the lessons learned in the wake of the referendum, it is argued that a renewed and reformed examination and open dialogue with the purpose of building mutual understanding and respect, is necessary particularly among citizens if the Canadian state is to continue, and a new, symbiotic unity be forged between Canada's linguistic communities.

In negotiating the Quebec Question, it is necessary to establish common definitions inherent to both Canadian and Quebecois thought on the idea of 'nation' if we are to attempt at finding ways to forge a renewed attempt at bridging the distance between Canada's two main linguistic groups. This is not an easy process as scholars have admitted to finding it difficult to provide any firm understanding of the term. This is understandable since the world does not offer itself to simple listing of attributes. Indeed, it requires a deeper examination at the philosophical and theoretical levels. This is because, as David Miller suggests, "nations are not

things that exist in a world independently of the beliefs people have about them" (17). Nevertheless, it is a vital starting point if only because the concept is fundamental to the differing anglophone and francophone understandings of Canada.

One may begin the definition in a concise way, and extrapolate from there. Charles Taylor basically defines a nation as a people who share a "form of group identification" (44). Maurizio Viroli expands philosophically on Taylor's definition and states that "nation means oneness...nation means life" (118, 123). Simply, a nation is something that provides a uniting force for a particular group of people who have an interest to call themselves a nation.

This may, in practical terms, be impractical, because these definitions do not give us a means to quantifiably define a nation. But contrary to general perception and analysis, to define a nation in this more abstract way is constructive because it forces us to take a closer, second look at a term that is easily misused in common discourse. Specifically, it takes us away at analysing from a superficial standpoint, based on characteristics like language, culture, race, but seeing nations as "communities whose very existence depends upon mutual recognition" (Miller 23). While it may be debatable how significant the nation is to its members, relative to other forms of identity, an important characteristic is that the nation "is not [a community] that the present generation can renounce" (Miller 24). At one level you can define this aspect of a nation as the cultural form of identity of an individual, but it is something that one is ingrained with at birth, like our mother tongue--it forges our very existence and influences our future, whether we realize it or not. The national identity is thus something that exists above and beyond citizenship but forms the core of an individual's being. Nationality "is something that for the most part [is] unchosen and unreflectively acquired" (Miller 43). So while Viroli states that a nation consists of a "love for our national culture...[an] attachment to a good that is distinctively our own and allows us to be distinctively ourselves," it does not necessarily mean that this love is consciously expressed through learning a particular interpretation of history, or living in a given territory (122). While those concrete aspects may assist in cultivating the national identity in practical ways, it does not necessarily result in a strong national identity. The whole character of this nationality is transmitted by the interaction between parents, families, and regions, forming a grander national identity, and is thus set apart from other forms of loyalty and collective organization.

From this basic, underlying understanding, we can then continue to refine the definition of a nation, incorporating more quantitative elements. In this area, it is constrictive to utilize Miller's assessment, noting five different elements of a national community. The first is a shared belief and mutual commitment, leading to further elements such as an extended history, active character, connection to a territory, and a distinct public culture (Miller 27). With respect to shared belief and mutual commitment, this is a concrete extension of the uniting force that provides the basis of a nation. Miller refers to Ernest Renan who suggested that a nation depends on 'a daily plebiscite,' however, as has been suggested, this force is not necessary conscious. In mentioning an 'extended history,' Miller is not saying that the mere existence of a common history is enough to forge a nation, but that the history in question creates a "community of obligation. Because our forebears have toiled and split their blood to build and defend the nation, we who are born into it inherit an obligation to continue their work, which we discharge partly towards our contemporaries and partly towards our descendants" (23). By active character, Miller explains that "nations are communities that do things together...that the link between past and future...is not merely a casual link. The nation becomes what it is by the decisions that it takes" (24). With 'connection to a territory,' Miller simply means that a nation is

connected to a "particular geographic place...a nation...must have a homeland" (24). Here it is important to note again that the existence of a territory does not necessitate a nation, but a practical aspect that can lead to the development of an underlying, perhaps unconscious national identity. Finally, by a 'distinct political culture,' he explains that a nation "requires that the people who share it should have something in common...There must be a sense that the people belong together by virtue of the characteristics they share" (25).

Despite the seemingly basic theoretical definition of a nation, Miller notes several caveats, particularly on common political culture and on common history. On common political culture, Miller notes that this commonality is not defined in the common terms of biological descent, the location of one's birth, or that the national qualities are equally present in each person, or that it "must be monolithic and all-embracing. A public culture may be seen as a set of understandings about how a group of people is to conduct its life together...[extending] to social norms...cultural ideals...[leaving] room for different private cultures within the nation" (26). So, while a nation consists of over-arching aspects giving members a sense of identity and community, it can have within its framework, room for a noticeable level of diversity.

With respect to common history, Miller makes a detailed point that the historical component of a nation is open to varying degrees of interpretation and even truthfulness. If the role of history is to create a sense of national obligation on the part of the individual, then it would be necessary "to [at least partially] mythologize the past...providing reassurance that the national community...embodies a real continuity between generations, and [performing] a moralizing role, by holding up before us the virtues of our ancestors and encouraging us to live up to them" (Miller 35-36). An important aspect about national history Miller notes is the importance of the process of establishing and sharing the history,

...the crucial line of division may lie not between the truth of 'real' history and the falsehood of 'national' history, but between national identities that emerge through open processes of debate and discussion, to which everyone is potentially a contributor, and identities that are authoritatively imposed by repression and indoctrination...identities that are authoritatively imposed...serve a narrower range of interests (Miller 39).

Arguably, Miller is implying that those nations whose history is meant more to encourage than discourage, meant to include rather than exclude, have a stronger ability to create legitimacy because it has a positive effect "on the nation's present self-understanding" (41). This is to say, that if the role of a common history within a nation is to legitimize the existence of the nation, then the process by which history is developed and expressed becomes significant. The 'truth' of history could be modified or interpreted in such a way as to force a deeper bond to the national group, emphasizing the good and remembering the mistakes to direct present and future generations.

With this relatively comprehensive definition of a nation, examining its inner components, we are then able to look outwards and see how a nation interacts with other nations and groups. It is from here we can examine the challenges facing national unity within the Canadian state between Canadian and Quebec nationalism.

Clearly both groups share Miller's characteristics that define a nation, up to and including the existence of an implicit belief in the nation in question; Quebecers are strongly Quebecers, and Canadians are just as strong in their belief. They both have developed a particular interpretation of a common history, resulting in vastly different perspectives on the direction

their history should take in the future. On the one hand, you have English Canada emphasizing the importance of federalism in the Canadian polity, and on the other hand, you have Quebecers emphasizing the socio-political aspects associated with the Compact Theory of Confederation. This then naturally leads to greater polarization between the two linguistic groups, emphasizing their differences from each other, further strengthening each of their definitions of nationality. English Canada generally sees Quebec as merely a province who happens to have a French-speaking majority; Francophone Quebecers generally see themselves as a distinct society since, and even prior to, Confederation, deserving special status. Each group has a strong active character, in many cases diverging from one another either by coincidence or by intent. Despite all attempts by English Canada to appease Quebec dissatisfaction, such as with the Quebec Act of 1774, a federal system as defined in the British North America Act of 1867, national bilingualism with the Official Languages Act of 1969, and a Resolution respecting Quebec as a distinct society in 1995, all have failed to bring Quebec closer in to the Canadian mosaic. And the combined effect of this has resulted in both segments of the Canadian state to desire ultimate control over a common territory, the most apparent result being either the status quo or Quebec separation.

In further discussing the probability of Quebec separation, it may seem apparent that at least a brief description of the history of circumstances that led to the current state of affairs would be necessary. Such an endeavour, however would not prove entirely fruitful. This is because, if we assume that Miller is correct in that the significance of history lies more in its interpretation than its truthfulness as a collection of facts, then using history as an argumentative tool in the negotiation of the Quebec Question would severely hinder the possibility of renewed discussion between English and French Canadians. McRoberts notes this reality, commenting that he has "been intrigued by how people can sustain a debate over such a long period of time without ever actually hearing, let alone understanding, what the other side is saying. The very sterility of the national unity debate has itself a certain fascination" (English Canada 7).

Therefore, if there is anything to be learned from the decades of negotiation with Quebec, and the centuries of accommodation by English Canada, it is that there exists an unwillingness to listen, despite a strong desire by both groups to be heard, resulting in separation of English and French speaking Canadians. It is precisely because there is an unwillingness to listen, and a strong will to force one's perception down the other's throat, that there has become a distinct division between Canada and Quebec. It is important to note here that while the linguistic division between English and French Canadians is a strong divisive force, it does not necessitate separation. While language differences have been used as an excuse that divides Canadians, it does not mean it is an adequate reason. There are ways of getting around the language barrier, as is very apparent in the international realm.

With respect to understanding the common history of the Canadian state, no one is interested in listening to the arguments defining Canada as a uniting of two peoples, simply because it is in direct contrast to the idea of Canada as being founded by the uniting of a number of provinces. With relevance to more recent history, no one is interested in listening to Quebec demand for greater political powers due to threats to the survivability of Quebec society, because no one outside Quebec considers French to be threatened under the current political arrangement, especially given the measures such as Bill 101 taken by the Quebec government. And no one is interested in hearing new ways of reforming the federation, bringing Quebec in to the Canadian constitution because it seems that constitutional talk has only led Quebec to drive itself further away from the rest of Canada. Thus, even by simply mentioning only a few of the major issues

affecting the Canadian unity question, a call for hope seems exceptionally hollow, and the prospects of a united Canadian state are very grim indeed.

From the standpoint of a Canadian interested in a united nation within the Canadian state, there is perhaps a desire to uncover who, or what, was the cause that resulted in this closing of the negotiating ears. What may seem unfortunate to his supporters, and a boon for Quebec nationalists, is the arguable position that Pierre Trudeau played an influential part in developing this current distressing situation between English and French Canadians. This of course was not his intent. McRoberts notes that "for over 15 years Canadian politics was dominated by the Trudeau government's pursuit of a 'national unity' strategy designed to transform the way in which Quebec francophones saw Canada and themselves" (Misconceiving 176). In emphasizing the idea of a 'Just Society,' Trudeau himself states that "it is important to stress that these two goals--equality of French with English and equality of economic opportunity wherever one lived--were conducive to a conception of a country as a place in which all Canadians were working together to make it strong and united" (360). Trudeau, thus, attempted to develop Canada "as a single political community composed of individuals, of whom some spoke English, some spoke French, and a growing number [speaking] both" (McRoberts, Misconceiving 176).

Despite his good intentions, however, his methods tended to create divisions and antagonize the very groups he attempted to bring in to the Canadian nation. As stated, Trudeau wanted to transform Quebec's perception of themselves within Canada, arguably by taking away the reasons Quebecers had generally given. With official bilingualism, Trudeau tried to "cause Quebec francophones to abandon their historical allegiance to Quebec and to identify first and foremost with the new Canadian political community, of which they would be an integral part" (McRoberts, Misconceiving 176). With multiculturalism, he tried to "negate biculturalism and the underpinnings of Canadian dualism" and thus weaken the two founding nations idea of Canada (McRoberts, Misconceiving 177). Both policies, however, hinged less on encouraging francophones to gain allegiance to Canada, and more on *forcing* them to become part of Canada by forcing them to re-evaluate their assumptions about Quebec and Canada given the new realities being developed because of official bilingualism, multiculturalism and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In a sense, the strategy seemed brilliant to Canada outside of Quebec, but within Quebec, it could easily be seen as a threat to their identity. And arguably, those very policies meant to incorporate Quebec in to Canada, pushed it away. From a theoretical perspective, this is understandable, as Miller notes that any "appeals to 'nation' appear to increase in their intensity at moments when traditional structures of authority are being challenged" (29). Nothing is perhaps as shocking to Quebecers as discovering that their fundamental *raison d'etre* in Canada--the two founding nations ideal--was being swept under the carpet by a policy of multiculturalism whereby the French minority in Canada was on par with immigrant Canadians who, to Quebec nationalists, did not have the same historical depth and significance in Canada. Such an enacted policy could be seen as a clear rejection by Canada outside Quebec, and particularly by Pierre Trudeau, of Quebec's distinctive and special nature within Canada.

But, what's done is done, and Canadians must find a way to restart the discourse on national unity without necessarily enflaming the traditional hot potatoes that has led to increasing separation of views between Quebec and the rest of Canada. For national unity to set a strong foothold in the psyche of Canadians, "for a communal identity to evolve through the dialogues of individuals...the individuals in question must be able to take each other serious--to *hear* each other--and that their conversation must contain a strong strain of optimism, a belief that the

desired thing will come into existence" (Conlogue 158). Important also is the need for more sincere self-criticism of each 'nation.' This is perhaps most critical, because without this mutual self-criticism, there is no way for both groups to realize their own actions and perspectives that have caused the division between them. If, for example, both English and French Canadians recognize that political personalities and ideologies have influenced the course of a particular segment of their common history, resulting in certain reactionary behaviour, this recognition could go a long way in forging a true sense of reconciliation.

This example brings up another key aspect, which is the need for a predominantly large grassroots attempt at national unity. This is not without its problems, as the general public is not as informed or knowledgeable about the issues that divide Canada, nor may they have the tools necessary to comprehensively look at the depth of the issue. But the need for a grassroots attempt is emphasized if one uses Miller's definition of a nation as being constituted fundamentally by a common belief in the existence of a nation. If a new national consciousness is to be developed, it must be developed, accepted, and implemented by a vast majority of the population. To create a new national identity based predominantly on representative agents such as politicians and academics runs the risk of creating a national history based on standards and norms irrelevant or insignificant to the common people. In addition, this identity based on a prescribed common history would lack the legitimacy of the majority, leading to the creation of new divisions based on conservative traditionalism bearing striking similarities to the current situation, although perhaps oriented differently.

Having prescribed a solution, however, we must weigh its practicality, and its ability to prevent Quebec sovereignty from dissolving the Canadian state. In terms of practicality, the ability to produce grassroots activity is not an impossible task, particularly given the ramifications of citizen inaction with respect to the Quebec Question. We only have to look in Quebec on October 26, 2000 to see an example in 'our own backyard' of a rise in grassroots activity in support for a united Canada. We can also look to the recent passing of Pierre Trudeau and the amount of emotional outpouring his death produced, both in Ottawa and in Montreal--the major socio-political centres of Canada and Quebec--to see how interested the public can be in participating in Canadian history. If Canadians are given significant reason--both analytical and emotional--to participate in the creation of a new understanding between English and French Canada, then the probability of action becomes increasingly possible. What organizers must try to overcome, however, is the real thinking that while "Canadians of good conscience certainly feel badly about Quebec. Unfortunately, they also feel that that's enough...People are sure they have done enough, when in fact they have only felt enough" (Conlogue 13-14). In forging a new identity, it will be necessary for citizens of both 'national persuasions' to make the effort to come together in good faith, and discuss calmly, openly and sincerely, the issues, historical perspectives, circumstances and consequences related to the national unity of Canada.

Returning yet again to Miller's notion that the nation is built firstly on the belief in its rightfulness, it may seem contradictory to prescribe grassroots discourse in attempting to forge a new nationality, when it was noted that this belief was not necessarily conscious, or central to the identification of the individual. Arguably, however, in the case of Canada, or any country segmented because of historical circumstances and conflicting interpretations, the conscious examination of nationality is necessary as a means of re-evaluating the faith of citizens in the current characteristics and circumstances that define a particular nation. If it has been conscious thoughts and actions that has resulted in Canada's disunity, then it necessarily requires that conscious thought and action be taken to repair the situation. Of course it is not an easy process

to undergo, and perhaps English and French-speaking Canadians are not prepared to create causes that serve to keep Canada together. If this is the case, then perhaps Canada is not worth keeping.

Whether this grassroots activity would be influential in, at least in the immediate future, of preventing Quebecers from choosing its future outside of Canada, depends largely on their participation and the amount of significance they, and fellow Canadians, place on it. One judge of this participation could be based on the level of identification Quebecers feel towards Canada. If Quebecers feel a certain level of allegiance to Canada, it is also possible that these people could also participate in this grassroots national rejuvenation project. Influential in encouraging participation, perhaps, is sharing the realization that French- and English-speaking Canadians have had a long, shared history, and that the existence of the Canadian state could not have been possible without each linguistic group. While differing visions and perceptions of Canada exist, it does not necessarily mean that the English and French-speaking populations were destined to be separate. Arguably, the strengths of both linguistic groups have been maintained because of their union within the Canadian federal state.

Thus, in the examination in to the probability of Quebec sovereignty, it has been shown that a need exists to rejuvenate the Canadian consciousness through a concerted attempt at reconciliation between competing understandings of Canada as a home for both English and French-speaking people. The divisions that have plagued the Canadian socio-political landscape are not necessarily ones that cannot be reconciled. Indeed, it has been argued that as long as a significant number of members from both groups are willing to explore new ways of defining their identity and understanding their unique qualities forged out of a political union 133 years ago, the continuance and increased stability of the Canadian state is possible. Issues such as history, influential personalities, and belief in the Canadian nation are all topics that can be stabilized if members of both communities are willing to make concerted efforts towards a unified conclusion. If Canadians of all persuasions are willing and able to learn the important lesson of opening their eyes and ears to the progressive prospects of national unity, then there is nothing inevitable about Quebec sovereignty.

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