

## Quebec's Model, Myths and Mood

In 1970, the French sociologist Michel Crozier wrote an academic treatise, *La Société Bloquée*, which went on to become a best seller. He was clearly on to something because a third edition of his book came out in 1999 arguing why the epithet still applies to France.

Last October, a new group—led by Lucien Bouchard under the awkward sobriquet of “Pour un Québec lucide”—issued a manifesto deploring the “situation de blocage” in contemporary Quebec. At a time when radical change is needed, a “kind of global refusal to change is hurting Quebec because it risks turning into a republic of the status quo, a fossil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

The manifesto led to a flood of comment and reaction. A counter-group, “Pour un Québec solidaire” quickly issued its own manifesto. And for those who find that heavy reading, the blogosphere offers the delightful manifesto of “Pour un Québec morbide”.

These clashing manifestos contain important arguments, but they are interesting as well as a reflection of some current political cleavages and debate in Quebec. Their central issue is wealth creation versus wealth distribution and the question of federalism or independence is not even raised.

The one journalist who signed the “lucide” manifesto is André Pratte, chief editorialist at *La Presse*. He and his colleague, Alain Dubuc, the papers leading columnist, share the best media bully pulpit in Quebec. Despite their opportunities to influence public opinion, frustrations has led each to lay out book length arguments on Quebec's myths, mood and model.

The books are complementary but very different. Paradoxically, it is Dubuc who has developed the “lucide” economic manifesto into a book. Pratte is more overtly political in attacking the myths of the large, nationalist consensus in the province.

While Quebec's economy has significantly closed the gap with Ontario and has some real strengths, Dubuc shows that its wealth is near the bottom of jurisdictions in North America. He concludes that Quebec's economy is not a catastrophe, but is “somewhere between mediocre and ordinary”.

The problem is less past performance than future prospects. Quebec “is heading straight towards decline, a drop in its relative standard of living, which could become clear within five or ten years”. The greatest risk is the demographic shock which has specialists “demonstrably terrified”. (Economist Pierre Fortin, a “lucide” signatory, says Quebec's working age population will drop from 70% today to 40% in 2030, slowing growth and burdening the state.)

Furthermore, Quebec is poorer than other provinces, spends more and taxes more, and has an exceptionally high debt, which renders it vulnerable. (Refreshingly, Dubuc does not think the federal government's correcting the "fiscal imbalance" will do more than address the smaller part of the problem.)

Dubuc argues that Quebec is in many ways paralyzed when the status quo is no option. This paralysis reflects Quebecers' ambivalence about wealth, loser complex, powerful unions, and politics aligned along constitutional lines. (He is especially scornful of how Bernard Landry made the PQ beholden to union interests.)

The Quebec model, "and the cult that inspires it", is central. Hard to define and difficult to make the subject of calm, rational debate, he sees it as including a social doctrine, an economic strategy, a culture of governance and a quest for identity—and goes on to up-end received wisdom on each. In particular, he finds the vaunted social model to be a variation on the Canadian model (and often indebted to "Canadian initiatives"), and neither especially effective nor generous.

His proposals include urgently addressing the fiscal challenge, creating a more competitive tax regime (more tilted to consumption taxes and less to personal and corporate income taxes) and to promoting the fundamental role of education and research (on both of which Quebec has some real strengths).

While sound, the more interesting parts of his argument address some sacred cows. High on the list is electricity where he argues that Quebec should introduce competitive market pricing and aggressively exploit the huge potential in Northern Quebec. Interestingly, in the federal-provincial debate on "fiscal imbalance" virtually no one outside Quebec has dared raise the sensitive issue of Quebec's non-market electricity rates, which deny the provincial government up to \$8 billion a year.

Dubuc also takes on Quebec's obsession with job creation because increasingly the issue will be labour shortages and the quality of the labour force, not subsidizing jobs. An egregious example of the latter was the Gaspesia case, a hopeless paper mill into which Bernard Landry (a particular *bête noire* of Dubuc's) sunk hundreds of millions before Charest pulled the plug. He deplores the underfinancing of Quebec's universities, in part because of the untouchability of frozen tuition fees. And he sees the refusal to proceed with public-private financing of infrastructure as further evidence of Quebec's outmoded consensus. He underlines that Quebec must dramatically improve its productivity to offset declining labour force growth. The problem is that Quebecers see "greater productivity" as code for squeezing more out of workers.

Dubuc calls for a debate on the priorities and approach of the provincial government (l'État), which could lead to a second Quiet Revolution and a "mobilizing project" around wealth creation as a way to secure Quebec's identity and values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

André Pratte voted "yes" in both referendums and placed himself for a long time in that large group of Quebeckers who are uneasy about the federation but lack a deep need to be citizens of an independent Quebec. His personal conversion came the night of the 1995 referendum, when he was revolted by Jacques Parizeau's blaming the defeat on "money and the ethnic votes". The next day he wrote thankfully of Quebeckers' narrow escape from letting Parizeau and his clique construct a country "for 'nous' and not the others". Even though Parizeau resigned and excuses were made, he and his thesis remain extraordinarily popular within the PQ.

Pratte starts with the tired, but fundamental, question: *What does Quebec want?* He fears that Quebeckers—federalists as well as sovereignists—are so caught up in a martyr complex, while the rest of the country is so frustrated with past failures to accommodate Quebec, that we have a false and sterile debate. His answer is that "first and foremost, Quebeckers want to be recognized".

While the great failure in this regard was the defeat of Meech Lake, Pratte attacks the "martyr" complex by finding that both sides carry responsibility for the string of failures. In particular, he points out that it was Quebec which rejected the Fulton-Favreau formula for constitutional amendment and the Victoria Charter, which badly misplayed its hand during the constitutional round of 1981 (giving birth to the myth of the 'night of the long knives') and which dismissed the Calgary declaration of 1997 when the other nine Premiers recognized "the distinct character of Quebec's society" and the National Assembly's role in protecting and promoting it.

Despite the constitutional failures, Pratte sees that Quebec's distinctiveness has been recognized implicitly in many ways and that specific demands for autonomy have usually resulted in agreements, including those on labour market training, immigration, the new national health council (where Quebec cooperates from outside), and parental leave. He also recognizes that Canada is one of the most decentralized federations in the world (tipping his hat to Stéphane Dion's arguments) and that the Quebec government has not been notably brilliant in executing some of its responsibilities.

"So why do Quebeckers always seek and more power for their provincial government? Because that is how they express their demand for recognition." However, full independence makes sense only as a means to an end and is not needed given that Quebec has been successfully transformed within the federation. He argues that the current PQ leadership has effectively dropped "association", thus breaking with the positions of Lévesque and Bouchard, and

that the supposed advantages of independence are unrealistic and risky: it is a “black hole”.

He is impatient too with many federalists, especially those who vaunt a Canada of perfect harmony, tolerance, prosperity and liberty. He accepts that Canada is exceptionally prosperous and peaceful, but “for Quebeckers, even many federalists, it is also the country which has always refused to formally recognize their distinctiveness, and which has long shown mistrust towards them and resisted their slightest steps forward”. The Canada that many federalists describe is not recognizable and therefore has not seduced Quebeckers.

This brings him back to the constitutional impasse. It matters because a country is more than prosperity and governmental programs: it must rest on a common vision. “A constitution’s function is to entrench this shared vision.” While attracted to British political theorist Michael Foley’s view that constitutions are made up not just of written principles and unwritten conventions but also of “constitutional abeyances”—unresolved issues that are too intractable or dangerous to bring to a written resolution—he still concludes that Quebec will always be tempted by separation without formal recognition of its distinctiveness.

He is discouraged by the federalist defense of Canada. While the debate around the Clarity Act was “not useless”, he believes the Plan B was essentially a failure and very marginal. He deplores the silence of federalists on the ground in Quebec, while the sovereignists are active, especially in cultivating the young at cégeps and universities. A new federalist culture is required that recognizes sovereignist ideology is deeply anchored in Quebec, and that re-engages in true debate. The fact that prospect of Quebec’s needed constitutional recognition, makes it more imperative to have a dialogue based on the “real” Canada. The new federalist strategy must be based on the basic premise that the unity of Canada can never be taken for granted.

His “real” country is the opposite of the bleak sovereignist vision of French in peril, a rigid federalism, and a Quebec subject to the will of others. It is also one where federalism is a “good idea” for reconciling diverse groups, accommodating plural identities, enriching democratic life and providing better service to citizens. (A good idea in need of rescue: only 33% of Quebeckers call themselves “federalist”, while 75% are proud to be Canadian.) Canada’s federalism also includes a degree of asymmetry, which Pratte endorses.

These two books are both important contributions to the debate in Quebec. The authors wrote them in frustration with the powerful consensus which stands in the way of the policies they advocate, but also with those who should be stronger allies. The Charest government has not lived up to many of its promises to reinvent the Quebec model. And the federalist camp has been distinguished by scandal, silence and drift, with a lack of energy and leadership.

Both books wobble on their prescriptions, though Dubuc's less, because he has well argued views on a many specific policies. His weakness is in the idea of wealth creation as the rallying cry for a second Quiet Revolution. He well recognizes that wealth cannot be an end in itself, but his formulation of a "mobilizing project" around wealth creation is crasser than his sophisticated argument merits perhaps because of glossing over legitimate political differences. He also neglects the tendency in our globalized economy towards growing disparities in wealth and has remarkably little to say (though mostly positive) about the role of federal policy in shaping Quebec's economy.

Pratte has made a long voyage from his two "yes" votes to his definitive defense of federalism. His emphasis on the "real" country is welcome because any federalist strategy must count on the real nature of Canada being known. Unfortunately, he scarcely touches on the nature and drivers of Quebecers' identity patterns as "Canadian" or "Quebecker" in varying degrees. Identity is a key predictor of a voter's position on the constitutional question and understanding the experiential and societal forces behind it merits close examination in the development of any strategy. He rightly underlines the symbolic importance of the constitution, but is he right to put so much emphasis on constitutional "recognition" as such? Surely the central issue is that the government, National Assembly or population have never endorsed the or a reformed constitution, which symbolically for many puts Quebec "outside" the constitution. Pratte seems to suggest that just getting the right words of recognition into the constitution would do the trick. In practice, Quebec's political class is likely to want much more than words of recognition. A constitutional settlement may be required to limit the country's vulnerability to a wave of separatist sentiment, but no one can see how to get there.

Pratte acknowledges this, so he wants a dialogue on the "real" country in the meantime. It would be welcome to see the facts and arguments he has put forward find their proper place in Quebec's dialogue, but the organized federalist political forces are sadly weakened for now.

Even if Canada avoids another constitutional crisis, Quebec's quandary is important for the whole country. The province could become a drag on Canada's performance and require further transfers because of its age imbalance between the working and non-working populations. Of course, some other provinces, especially in the Atlantic, face similar challenges.

This goes to the "lucide" phenomenon. Polls suggest Lucien Bouchard is still by far the Quebec's most popular politician. He and other credible voices in the province are prepared to work to change the provincial debate away from the stale constitutional impasse to more material challenges. The "lucide" group has made addressing these issues central and deliberately separated them from the question of independence. The surprising success of the federal Tories in becoming a real option in Quebec has also shifted the ground and put the

sovereignists on the defensive. Finally, Quebec's left has split off and formed its own political party, Québec Solidaire, which will sap support from the PQ.

In other words, Quebec is showing some interesting fluidity for a "société bloquée". It will need it.