The History of Québec and Roots of the Sovereignty Movement

by Nadine Fabbi

The study of Québec is indeed an intriguing one for American educators and students. First, there is no other province in this country other than Québec that has only one official language that is not English. And, there are few countries or regions in the world that have struggled for linguistic and cultural survival and then created protective policies and laws that have so been successful.

French settlement in North America dates back almost to the same time as English settlement and colonization (Québec City was settled in 1608 just a year after Jamestown was founded). But each colony would develop a very distinctive character. For example, New France was more interested in the fur trade than in French colonists. The English, on the other hand, moved quickly to implement language laws that effectively protected French. Bill 101 made French the official language of Quebec, the dominant language in the workplace, and the language used in the society and status in North America. Given the struggles for the linguistic and cultural survival, it is natural that a minority of 7 million francophones would last well into the 20th century. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, French-Canadians remained underequated, mostly rural, religious, and mainly laborers for the English-owned businesses. It wasn’t until the 1950s that intellectuals began to speak out against Church control over their lives and English political and economic dominance. In 1960 everything changed. Jean Lesage, a new and forward-looking leader was voted in as Premier of the province and sparked a political movement in Québec similar to the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. – “the Quiet Revolution”. The new government took back ownership of Québec businesses from the English and set up policies and laws to protect French language and culture. The popular slogan at the time was, “Même chez nous!” or “Matters in our own house!” The English left Montréal for Toronto in droves.

The Quiet Revolution wasn’t entirely quiet, however. During the 1960s, a terrorist group formed called the Front de Libération du Québec (Québec Liberation Front) or, more popularly, the FLQ. The FLQ set bombs in garbage cans and eventually kidnapped a diplomat and provincial politician murdering the politician. This tense month in 1970 was labeled the “October Crisis” and marked the end of the Quiet Revolution in Québec.

In the mid-70s, a new provincial party was founded by René Lévesque, the Parti Québécois (PQ). The PQ, a separatist party, became the party of power overnight. They moved quickly to implement language laws that would effectively protect French. Bill 101 made French the only official language of Quebec, the dominant language in the workplace, and the language used in most schools and mandatory for the children of immigrants. Since that time, the Parti Québécois became so popular that it served as the Official Opposition in the federal government for several years.

Today, popularity rests with another new political party, the Action Démocratique, although the Quebec Liberal Party, led by Jean Charest is in power. Many of the issues faced by the Québécois since the Conquest, are no longer of concern. Québec has a strong economy with the largest hydro-electric output in the nation, a vibrant technology industry, and a world-renowned cultural industry. The Québécois are indeed “masters in their own house.” Québec remains a fascinating subject for American students because of its unusual history and distinct society and status in North America. Given the struggles for cultural and linguistic survival in an increasingly globalized world, Québec provides a positive example that a minority of 7 million francophones can indeed exist in a “sea” of about 300 million Anglophones in North America and thrive in their distinctiveness.
**Province of Québec: Geographical Highlights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>1,540,680 km² (of which 183,889 km² is inland water); 15.51% of Canada</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Zone</td>
<td>Eastern Standard Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Parks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highest Point</td>
<td>Mont Saint-Bruno (Tongariro Mountains) 1652 m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lowest Point</td>
<td>Atlantic Coast (sea level)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Largest Lakes</td>
<td>(entirely within PQ) 24 lakes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lec Mistassini 2336 km, Manicouagan Reservoir 1842 km</td>
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**Province of Québec: Fact Sheet**

- Created as a Province: July 1, 1867 (one of the original four)
- Origin of Name: An Algonquian word meaning "where the river narrows," a reference to the narrowing of the St. Lawrence River at Cap Diamond
- Provincial Flower: Blue flag or flag lily (Iris versicolor), adopted November 5, 1999, and replacing the Madonna lily
- Motto: Je me souviens (I remember)
- Capital City: Québec City
- Provincial Government: Lieutenant-Governor, Executive Council (premier and cabinet), National Assembly, with 125 elected members (MLAs)
- Flag: Order of the Lieutenant Governor in Council, January 21, 1948
- Coat of Arms: Royal Warrant of Queen Victoria, May 26, 1868

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  - Christopher Moore brings "the father of New France" to life and, through him, creates a portrait of Canada in its earliest days. This remarkable book is entirely illustrated entirely with paintings, archival maps, and original artifacts.

  - The “chasse-galerie” is a well-told legend in French Canada. In various versions, lumbermen make a pact with the devil to fly them home, with uncertain outcomes. Roch Carrier’s version is fun and makes a good elementary-level read-aloud. Roch Carrier’s story The Hockey Sweater (ISBN: 0-88776-169-0) is also highly recommended and the themes used can be analyzed at all grade levels. This one’s a favorite.

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**QUEBEC ON THE WEB**

- Canadian Studies Web Center: www.canadianstudies.ca
- Confederation for Kids: Québec www.collectionscanada.ca/confederation/kids/h2-1360-e.html
- Quebec History Encyclopedia: http://www2.marianopolis.edu/quebechistory/encyclopedia/index.htm
- Virtual Museum of New France: www.civilization.ca/vmfn/vmfnfe.asp
- Teaching Canada Resources (high school level lesson plans and units that include Québec): www.umaine.edu/canam/k12outreach/resources/lessonhigh.htm#DISCOVER%20CANADA

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