

## **Quebec: How the Millennials Generation Redefines the Nationalist Discourse**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Quebec election of 2018 marks a turning point in Quebec history. First of all, the outgoing government of the Quebec Liberal Party is dramatically disavowed. The oldest party in Quebec, which has also been the most often and over the longest period of time in power, is left with less than 25% of the vote, which is the lowest rate in its history. Different economic decisions, including many cuts in services to the population, especially in health and education, may explain why citizens were fed up of this government, but other factors, such as its break with its traditional nationalist position, are also to be considered. Then there is the fall, already announced for some years now, of the number of votes for the Parti Québécois (17%). This party first came to power in 1976 with a sovereigntist and progressive program and was alternatively governing the Quebec province with the Liberal Party according to a bipartite logic (despite the presence of other parties). The Parti Québécois has been overtaken at its left by the party Quebec Solidaire, also sovereigntist (16%). The total sum of the votes for these two sovereigntist parties amounts to 33% of the votes. Thus, the death of the sovereigntist movement has not yet materialized, given that the electorate of Quebec Solidaire is mainly composed of young people.

Finally, and last but not least, this election was historic because the party Coalition Avenir Québec took power for the first time by becoming a majority government. Its leader, François Legault, former Minister within one of past Parti Québécois government, took a stand during the campaign for a decrease in the number of immigrants received each year and for better integration of these, mainly through French speaking requirements. CAQ promoted secularism and the prohibition of wearing religious symbols for people in positions of authority. This position corresponds to the turn of the party started in 2015 towards a nationalist position without being sovereigntist. This position is very similar to the traditional position of the Liberal Party of Quebec, which had been gradually abandoned, up to the point that Philippe Couillard, the former Premier, was directly in line with the Canadian multiculturalist position, going as far as to propose to ratify the Canadian Constitution of 1982, which no Quebec governments, whatever its allegiance, had wanted to do before.

Actually, the 2018 Quebec election marked also a turning point in the resurgence of Quebec nationalism, namely through the election of the Coalition Avenir Québec (37% of the vote) and its positions on immigration, French and secularism, or the percentage of votes for two parties that are openly sovereigntists (33% of the vote). These three parties show many forms of nationalism, but the discourses that underlie them are very different. We therefore seek to verify how these forms of nationalism are characterized and by whom are they carried. By making interviews and focus groups representative of the different groups of the Quebec population, we checked which issues, including the integration of immigrants, secularism, protection of the French language, dissemination of Quebec culture, distribution of wealth, intergenerational equity, food sovereignty, and environmental issues, were of concern to which generation. Each generation has its own characteristics, but that of the Millennials' stand out, especially the importance of environmental issues and its very ambiguous relationship with the other elements of Quebec nationalism, namely to its opposite, multiculturalism. Some writers spoke of the end of a cycle (Bock-Côté, 2012), a new one may be starting already.

## II INTERCULTURALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

The historical debate about Québécois nationhood is still an important reality in the province of Quebec and the Québécois (French-Canadians from this province) have developed a particular sense of belonging and a kind of nationalism that is unique. For some of them, this nationalism tends towards the left, for others towards the right, but under all circumstances, it is uniquely linked to their identity. French language and Quebec culture seem to represent the core identity of the Québécois. But during the last few years, various sociopolitical events led to raise questions publicly about their relationship with others and moreover, about secularism. In 2007, the Consultative Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences (known as the Bouchard-Taylor Commission) was appointed to the public inquiry on the subject of "reasonable accommodation". Reasonable accommodation refers to the obligation of private and public institutions to accommodate diversity in their staff and clientele as long as the accommodation does not cause excessive disruption (Marois, 2005: 2). The Report endorsed an 'open secularism' model, which is closer to the 'freedom of religion' concept than strict notions of secularism such as those endorsed in France (Conway, 2012). The Commission recommended that judges, crown prosecutors, police officers, prison guards and the president and vice-president of the National Assembly be prohibited from wearing religious signs and symbols, but stopped short of extending the same prohibition to teachers, public servants, health professionals and other government employees. The Commission's working model for the integration of ethno-cultural minorities was interculturalism. As one of the co-chairs subsequently elaborated, "We have to protect, to shield ourselves from anything that looks like fragmentation... Any model that seeks to manage Québec's ethno-cultural diversity effectively must take into account the existence of an ethno-cultural majority and the uncertainty that is associated with its future" (Bouchard, quoted in Montpetit 2011). Although Québec does not have the same constitutional commitment to secularism as France, the concept resonates with many of its citizens. However, the Liberal government did not make use of the report's recommendations. The Parti québécois (PQ) government, that later took over from the Liberal government, tried to remedy this by proposing in 2013 a Charter of Values, *inter alia*, the prohibition of public sector employees from wearing or displaying conspicuous religious symbols. This proposal provoked heated debates even if the polls showed that the population was rather favorable (Mullaly 2011) but did not have time to be adopted since a new Liberal government succeeded in 2014. The latter proposed a Commission on Systemic Racism in 2017 and passed a law barring people from covering their faces when using public services (Bill 62). For different reasons, both actions did not receive a good reception. The Commission on systemic racism was perceived as biased in Quebec while the adoption of Bill 62 caused a lot of anger and misunderstanding, not to say "Quebec bashing", in the media in English Canada, although according to a Ipsos poll, 68 per cent of Canadians would either strongly or somewhat back the religious neutrality law in their part of the country (Abedi, 2017).

During the last electoral campaign, François Legault, leader of the Coalition Avenir Québec, insisted on the fact that once on power, his government will propose a law about secularism. With a majority government and survey results showing that a clear majority of Quebecers, especially French-speaking population, are moving towards his project (Lajoie, 2019), he proposed the Bill n°21: "An Act respecting the laicity of the State". The bill is

based on four principles: the separation of state and religions, the religious neutrality of the state, the equality of all citizens and freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. Bill 21 would prohibit any public worker in a position of authority, including public school teachers, from wearing religious symbols (Shingler, 2019). The debate about the bill is not as strong as it has been in 2013 with the Charter of values of the Parti Québécois. Partly because now both Coalition Avenir Québec and Parti Québécois agree on the necessity of the bill, and partly because the main voices that are the most strongly against it are from English Canada or Quebec anglophones, and that some of these critics are so virulent that they pour into Quebec bashing. With the exception of the Bloc Québécois, the federal parties unanimously denounced the draft law on secularism tabled by the government of François Legault. Justin Trudeau (Liberal Party of Canada), Andrew Sheer (Conservative Party) and Jagmeet Singh (New Democratic Party) have strongly voiced their disagreement. “Canada is a secular country, a country that deeply respects individual freedoms, including freedom of expression, conscience and religion. Quebec is too”, said the Canadian prime minister (Blouin, 2019). It is a real shock between two perceptions.

## **Laicity**

For many, secularism is widely considered a core Quebec value. Where freedom of religion implies a right to worship according to the tenets of the religion of one’s choice, secularism asserts a freedom from public religion, and insists that the state be neutral on religious questions. Although Quebec does not have the same constitutional commitment to secularism as France (see Barras, 2009), it is widely perceived as a valuable legacy of the province’s ‘Quiet Revolution’ in the 1960s, which challenged the predominant role of the Catholic Church (Sharify-Funk, 2010, 542).

Secularism is also widely perceived in Québec as a valuable legacy of the province’s ‘quiet revolution’ in the 1960s, which challenged the predominant role of the Catholic Church in Québec society (Sharify-Funk 2010, 542). But also, the current nationalism is largely tinged with republicanism, similar to the one vehiculated by the *Patriotes* (Parenteau, 2014). Secularism is indeed rooted to some dramatic events linked to Francophones’ affirmation, namely the Patriots’ Rebellion of 1837. Indeed, at that time, the number of political and economic irritants for Francophones was high enough for a new party to arise, the “Parti Patriote”, headed by Louis-Joseph Papineau, who claimed new rights and “92 résolutions” strongly inspired by republicanism, but also truly progressive: freedom of press and that of expression, universal suffrage, elections at all levels of government, ministerial responsibility, free and compulsory education, secular schools, equality between whites and Aborigines and establishment of a republic free from England (Laporte, 2015, 11). Moreover, this party allowed the first member of the Jewish religion to sit in parliament in 1832 and some anglophones allied with the Patriots. However, the British authorities promptly accused the Patriots of treason and sent many soldiers to fight against Patriots: After many rapes, village fires and deadly battles, several patriots were hanged or deported to Australia. This painful episode led the British to question their way of doing things and they asked Lord Durham to evaluate the situation and produce a report in 1840. This report literally recommended assimilating the French-Canadian population, which for him was “a people with no literature and no history”, and to do so, he advocated the union of the two

Canadas and a series of constitutional reforms, which are still not good memories for Quebecers. So for many, the values at the core of the Political movement of the Patriotes are still the basis of their actual political action and nationalist affirmation, in a sense of continuity.

Quebec nationalism is therefore still progressive, but also protectionist, as is a French-speaking minority population within a vast English-speaking continent. Quebec's policies have concentrated on protecting the French language and culture from assimilation into the English-speaking majority (Lecours and Nootens, 2009). Accordingly, the working policy in the province is one of interculturalism. The essence of this model is that immigrants should be integrated into a common language through the medium of the French language (Bouchard, 2012). As Sharify-Funk (2010, 537) observes, "concerns with pure wool Quebecers' insecure minority status within Canada has ... created considerable ambivalence about the broader implications of multicultural policy and has at times reduced empathy for other Canadian minority groups in Quebec which has fuelled debates about how far the province should go to. The question of secularism can also play into cultural insecurities. Multiculturalism, understood as "an obligation to accord the history, language and culture of non-dominant groups the same recognition and accommodation that is accorded to the dominant group" (Kymlicka, 2003: 150) suggests that face veils, as a symbol of cultural identity, should be tolerated in the public sphere, if not celebrated. However, Quebec has never officially endorsed multiculturalism, though Canada is formally committed to multiculturalism as state policy, entrenched in its constitution.

## **Multiculturalism**

The Canadian nationalism is for many linked with the concept of multiculturalism, but this concept is mainly the idea of one man, Pierre-Elliot Trudeau. In the 1960s, during the constitutional negotiations of the Pearson government, Trudeau was anxious to give Quebec special powers and preferred to drop the notion of "peuples fondateurs" to favor "bilingualism" in the federal public service as (weak) responses to the recommendations of the Laurendeau-Dunton Commission on the precarious status of French-Canadians (Clarkson and McCall, 1990). Trudeau became leader of the Liberal Party and then Prime Minister of Canada in 1968 and promptly promoted Canadian nation building by first adopting the Official Languages Act in 1969, accompanied by a notion of services in the minority language within the agencies and institutions under federal jurisdiction. Then, driven above all by a "visceral antinationalism" towards Quebec, he wanted to rebuild Canada by taking as a model an exemplary cosmopolitan citizenship freed from its historical origins. Canada defined itself essentially by its multiculturalism, in a country where history does not count (Bock-Côté, 2016). It is this principle that he put into practice in 1982 with the Constitutional Repatriation, when he enshrined the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, not without difficulties (Bastien, 2013). It rendered possible for the Supreme Court, whose judges are appointed by the federal government, to invalidate federal or provincial laws in contradiction to their interpretation of what constitutes a violation of the Charter (Weinrib, 1998). It will be remembered that Quebec did not sign this Constitution and has not yet signed it. When Brian Mulroney's government attempted the Meech Lake Accord, and then the Charlottetown Accord, Trudeau published texts to signal his disagreement and disregard

for these two attempts at constitutional reconciliation. After Canada held its breath in 1995 during Quebec's referendum on sovereignty, Jean Chrétien's government continued to focus on Trudeau's strong symbols and use several advertising firms to promote Canada to Quebec in a variety of ways. This was later called the "sponsorship scandal" (Kozolanka, 2006). Stephen Harper's conservative government attempted to bring back national symbols that distanced themselves from those used by the Liberal Party of Canada, notably by putting monarchical symbols in the forefront, but also by passing a motion in 2006 that recognizes that "the Quebecers form a nation within a united Canada".

The arrival of Justin Trudeau as leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and Prime Minister of Canada in 2015 brought back the legacy of his father Pierre Elliott Trudeau to the forefront by focusing on multiculturalism as the Canadian identity itself. Actually, he put into practice an exacerbated interpretation of his father's ideology, making "bilingual" speeches, that is to say, in the same sentence, he passes from one language to another. In terms of multiculturalism, one of his important gestures was to appoint a gender-equal cabinet ("because we are in 2015", he said to justify it), "who represents Canada in its diversity", with representatives of several minority groups, including two Aboriginal people, three Sikhs, a disabled person, etc. He also repeated a few times that there is only one Canadian nation, inclusive and diverse, going further than his father. In addition, his actions hammered the importance of being open to diversity. Thus, on several occasions, he participated in the celebration of religious festivals of different cults, wearing, for the occasion, the traditional clothes of these cults. The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Canadian Federation did not lead to any historical reminder, but rather to a "celebration of diversity". Actually, it was the sovereigntists who commemorated the event by portraying this event rather bitterly (Sarra-Bournet and Laporte, 2017).

## QUEBEC NATIONALISM

The different nationalist backgrounds of Quebecers and Canadians might explain why the reactions have been so different between them around the question of wearing religious ostentatious signs. In a published study about the way Quebec women perceive the wearing of religious signs, it was found that younger women are more open to the practice, at least in some circumstances, perhaps because of a greater exposure to ethno-religious diversity during their formative years, or from the implementation of the school program "Éthique et culture religieuse" which celebrates diversity. However, nationalist values were stronger than religious beliefs or feminism to explain the position of Québécoises on this matter (O'Neill et al., 2014).

Although public attitudes in English-speaking Canada do not always fully support multiculturalism, there is a reasonable degree of acceptance of its basic tenets (Banting 2010) and there have been only very limited efforts to regulate Muslim women's head coverings in English-speaking Canada. However, there has been different measures taken to accommodate religious signs, namely in 1990, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers were permitted to wear Sikh turbans as part of their duties. This exception, coming from the government, affected the Canadian Armed Forces as well as the Toronto and Edmonton police. More recently, in 2017, the federal transportation agency allowed individuals to carry on board in all national and international flights the Sikh ceremonial

knife (kirpan). The situation in Quebec is different (Labelle et al. 2009). Indeed, according to the former minister responsible for the Charter of the French Language, “Multiculturalism is not a Québec value. It may be a Canadian one, but it is not a Québec one” (Louise Beaudoin, quoted in Séguin, 2011). In 2006, The Supreme Court overturns a judgment of the Quebec Court of Appeal which sanctioned the wearing of kirpan in schools. The decision marked a new triumph of multiculturalism while opening the door even greater to the expression of religious differences in schools (Myles, 2006).

Yet many believe that the strong symbols of multiculturalism promoted by Pierre-Elliott Trudeau won the hearts of Canadians. It gave Canadians a new identity. However, as a side-effect, it was found that it also affected the Quebec sovereignty movement (Bédard, 2007). Despite a long-standing nationalism, the sovereigntists were partly seduced by these ideas. The promotion of interculturalism, which was Quebec’s response to multiculturalism, departs from the republicanism advocated by the Patriots and nationalists of the Quiet Revolution. But with the rise of the use of the Charter of Rights and Freedom to protect minorities, the debate changes: it is always the individual rights that take precedence over those of the nation, even if this nation is itself a minority (Bock-Côté, 2016). According to this, the government of Quebec will be obliged to use the notwithstanding clause to pass Bill 21. The protection of minorities is quite attractive to many progressive thinkers and for them, Quebec is not considered as a minority group, but as an oppressive majority. That is the position of Québec Solidaire, which was very popular among young voters at the last Quebec election.

## A NEW NATIONALISM

The election of October 1, 2018 confirmed the break-up of Quebec nationalism. Having become multifaceted, nationalism is among those who support the Parti Québécois, but also among sympathizers of Québec Solidaire in the form of social progressivism, and finally in the form of a more conservative nationalism among those who voted for the Coalition Avenir Québec. The failure of the convergence of the Parti Québécois and Québec solidaire before the last election is also revealing of the fracture of this nationalism. What are the causes of this breakup? If we must believe the authors who have examined the question, notably Jacques Beauchemin (2005) and Mathieu Bock-Côté (2007), the rise of individualism and the judicialization of political demands of minorities, coupled with the absence of a strong sovereigntist discourse of identity since the 1995 referendum, would have contributed to a loss of the national memory of Quebec in the era of multiculturalism. For other authors, including Jean-Herman Guay (1997), the motivations of Quebecers to achieve independence as they existed in the 1960s and 1970s are no longer relevant. The real social and economic emancipation of Quebecers makes sovereignty no longer necessary. However, some authors, like Eric Martin (2017), tend to believe that the future of the nationalist movement must necessarily go through a return to an association between independence and progressivism, or even socialism.

How do Quebecers perceive this nationalism? Is their nationalism more related to their identity or rather to a social project, even an environmental project? While a review of the recent scientific literature allows us to better understand the complexity of this breakup of nationalism, it has not been empirically verified. We propose to study how Quebecers

perceive their identity, whether they have fears about the future, whether they are afraid for the future of the French language or for the environment, and what are their sensitivities towards pluralism and secularism. We want to understand if these perceptions are unique to a generation or if they are present within all groups. With this goal in mind, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews from November 2018 to March 2019 with people from each generation being represented, to evaluate whether their perception of issues linked to nationalism are generational or rather related to a global change in values that affects the entire population. We determined to what extent each of the factors identified are distributed in our sample which was as representative as possible of the different elements of the nationalist movement, by interviewing people scattered to all the Quebec political spectrum.

The results of our interviews confirmed certain elements of the literature. Among them, the different generations did not have the same attitude towards issues like the protection of French language or secularism. Not surprisingly, the older participants (baby-boomers and over) were talking about the fact that the reasons why they get interested and/or involved in politics were about the same now: protection of French language and more progressive political measures (equity, gender issues, etc.), and for a majority of those interviewed, Quebec sovereignty. Secularism was not the reason of their previous political involvement, but they mention how important it was for them today, especially those who remember how it was before the Quiet revolution. The Quebecers from other ethnic origins who were among this generation were also strongly in favor of secularism, talking about their personal experience to explain their position. They also mentioned the importance of employment for the integration of immigrants. Environment, but mainly economic measures to counter inequities between rich and poor, were also among their preoccupations, as well as for the generation X. They mostly get involved for these reasons, but also for the protection of French language. Some mentioned secularism as being important, others talked about the importance of having a Constitution for Quebec, the rationale being to affirm Quebecers' values. They were less interested in being involved as activists in a party than to participate as citizens. They also mentioned that the political system should adapt, namely having proportional representation. For the youngest generations, the results were mixed: some of them were involved in politics mainly to promote the sovereignty of Quebec, and environment was one of their core values. For others, environment was driven their involvement and all the questions linked to identity were not really of interest to them. The protection of French language and Quebec culture were not that preoccupant. They were more concern about overconsumption and the fact that Canada was a 'petroleum state'. Their position on secularism was also mixed: most of them did not see the point of having such a law, some were clearly against it, especially among federalists, and others find it barely acceptable, but that was not their main preoccupation. Among all groups, at the question whether they were positive or not about the future, surprisingly, the age was not significative but rather their involvement in politics. Having the feeling of being able to change things was enough to encourage them about the future. Even those who were not sure of being able to see the sovereignty of Quebec while still alive were confident that the new generation would be able to do it.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of our interviews showed that the literature about the “denationalisation” of Quebec is partially confirmed: Quebec nationalism is changing, and the younger generation might have a different way of being nationalist. Indeed, for youngest generations, issues linked to identity and the defence of French were not among their priorities, nor secularism. However, secularism was not the priority of neither of the generations. The older ones, baby boomers and X, were all favorable, but it was not their priority but rather a kind of evidence that it was the way things should be. Among them, some mentioned that measures to encourage the employment and the learning of French should be prioritised in order to help immigrants. The defence of French language was at the core of their preoccupations while the questions of environment was the main ones for the Millenials generation. Among the Millenials which were sovereigntists, sovereignty was seen as a mean to implement measures which fits their values, especially to enforce sustainable development and equality. This attitude is similar to what we can see within the activists of Quebec solidaire, who are primarily at the left of the spectrum, and for whom the issues of identity are only important if they are linked with the protection of religious, gender or ethnic minorities, but not important in regard of the identity of Quebec, even if it can be considered as a minority in Canada. Does this mean that it is the end of nationalism? The strength of the answers regarding the importance of having a strong Quebec state in order to implement measures in accordance with Quebecers’ values is eloquent: it is a form a nationalism. Thus, nationalism certainly evolved in Quebec, especially among the Millenials generation, which see identity debates quite differently than the older generations, but nevertheless, they seem to have a different, quite strong, way of being nationalists.

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