

A greater international role for Quebec, *pourquoi pas?*

In his "charm Quebec" operation, Tory Leader Stephen Harper's recent speeches were punctuated with promises such as correcting the fiscal imbalance, decentralizing powers to the provinces and considering another round of constitutional negotiations. To top off this impression of his predecessor, Brian Mulroney, Stephen Harper went as far as saying he would extend Quebec more power in international affairs if he's elected.

Unfortunately for him, Harper's latter proposition is not likely to be of any help outside of Quebec. English Canada has always been opposed to an international voice for the rebel province. Coming from a federal party, *a fortiori* the Conservative, such a proposition is seen as a sign of weakness by the rest of Canada.

It seems the only good strategy to thwart the sovereigntist movement since the early Trudeau era has been to circumscribe any kind of project seen as nationalistic, even if they're backed up by a provincial federalist government.

Overall, the position of the federal government has always been the same: to strongly fight the need for a province to speak internationally on issues related to their constitutional jurisdiction. Despite this strong resistance, and with much help from France, Quebec still managed to snatch some profile on the world stage. Forty years later, its diplomacy role is somewhat established (with a network of diplomats around the world), albeit still disputed by the central government.

What were the results of holding back Quebec's legitimate ambitions? The rigid attitude of the federal government over the years aggravated the constant bickering with this clearly distinct province. Today, it seems the vitality of the sovereigntist movement has reached a historic peak.

One can wonder if the unflexible position of Ottawa has anything to do with it? Otherwise, how to explain the strong appeal of sovereignty today? Economic and linguistic reasons in Quebec are not as strong factors in the equation as they were before the Quiet Revolution. Yet, the question of identity and recognition still stands out, particularly in the light of globalization.

Being able to take part in a discussion relevant to a province's interest would seem to be a good starting point. But that's where the "united voice" clashes with the "unique voice" in Ottawa's view.

Whether we like it or not, Canada is mostly seen abroad as a monolithic state. Most of the Queen's subjects outside Canada have no idea of the existence of French Canada. France is probably the only exception to this rule. You can't underestimate the frustration of not being recognized as being part of a country, not to say a nation.

But who is to blame for this? In the early 1960s, Paul Martin Senior, who was then Foreign Affairs minister, made his *mea culpa* on behalf of the federal government for the lack of francophone presence in the federal bureaucracy and foreign service. Add to this the fact that it's rather difficult to eradicate or modify a particular image that has been embedded for so long. Classical Canadian symbols (such as the stereotypical Mountie) are already hard to overshadow. Imagine when money and stamps still bear the face of the Queen of England! Because of its geopolitical situation, Canada has to work even harder to promote its bilingual image. Hence the importance of letting Quebec help out in this regard.

Quebec's federalist premier is up for it

The idea of giving Quebec more room to speak during International Forums is surprisingly welcomed by federalist Quebec's premier, Jean Charest, a former federal Conservative. In fact, Charest's government seems to be showing a strong interest in the area of diplomacy since recent talks officiated both by Quebec and Canada have led to the ratification of UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression.

Thus the Harper proposition gives moral support to the Quebec Liberals. It also enables them to brush off Martin's Liberals who have shown little interest in giving Quebec more latitude in the realm of foreign affairs.

No one could have predicted that sudden interest for Quebec's diplomacy at the beginning of the Charest mandate. Besides reaching out to his federalist nationalist electorate, one can wonder what are the real intentions behind the government's will to play out Quebec's international relations card? However, it would be hard for any observers to tag Jean Charest a moonlighting "separatist". Does the Lake Meech episode ring a bell?

All the talks about a more active presence for Quebec abroad by Quebec Liberals –and perhaps the Conservatives– have yet to materialize. One thing seems certain though: the rigid strategy of the past regarding Quebec has failed. The idea of a decentralized Canada is an approach not to brush aside. Giving Quebec more visibility on the international scene is perhaps the most powerful signal to launch a new federal-provincial strategy. It is doubtful that the image of a united Canada would suffer from a more active international presence by the provinces.

An increased diplomatic role for Quebec –and the provinces– appears to be necessary in this new age of globalization. This, only, could motivate the federalist coalition in Quebec (and Ottawa) to put in action all of their talks regarding international relations. For the question of identity is always a big stone in the foundation of Quebec's nationalism.