

The historical roots of such feelings can be traced back to the French Régime, when the whole political and economic life of the French Canadians was determined in Paris. The conquest in 1760 brought a new threat to their cultural and religious institutions. It coincided with the beginning of a long struggle to preserve these institutions and to achieve political liberty.

Struggle for Political Control

Soon after the conquest, in 1774, the French Canadians obtained the right to speak their language and to practise their religion in Quebec. However, they felt that such a right would not be completely secure unless they had the control over their political institutions.

In 1791, an elective assembly was established, but the Governor and his ministers were not responsible to the elected members. A long and bitter fight soon developed over that issue between the Governor and the French-Canadian political leaders. It led to the rebellion of 1837 and to a new constitution in 1840. Finally, the battle for responsible government was won in 1848.

The political scene remained, however, the main concern of the French Canadians. The constitution of 1840 could not provide stable government; racial rivalries were still strong; economic conditions were worsening. The project of Confederation was submitted as a solution, but its discussion started another controversy, which retained the attention of French-Canadian leaders beyond 1867.

Soon after Confederation, another long quarrel developed on cultural institutions. As a result of economic stagnation in Quebec, many French Canadians emigrated to the Canadian West. They wanted to have their own schools but the English-speaking Canadians in Manitoba were not prepared to accept such institutions. That internal quarrel in Manitoba soon developed into a conflict between Ontario and Quebec. Other sources of division appeared in rapid succession: the Saskatchewan school question, Canadian participation in the Boer War and World War I, the imposition of conscription and the Ontario school question.

Meanwhile, an important constitutional evolution was taking place. In 1867, the Fathers of Confederation had established a strong central government. Some years later, however, the provinces, led by Quebec, initiated a movement to get wider powers and greater autonomy. That movement was strengthened by economic and social evolution, but especially by the decisions of the Privy Council in London. In the 1920's, the provinces had won their battle; they became, in fact, sovereign in their own field; the scope of their legislative jurisdiction widened, and they secured greater taxation powers.

State of Peaceful Coexistence

In the late 1920's, at the end of a long period of political struggle, the situation in Quebec could be summarized as follows: