

Their habits, their language and their religion have remained as different from ours as they were before the Conquest. In fact, it seems that it is their wish to be considered a distinct nation.

Alexis de Tocqueville also noted that when he came to Quebec in 1831:

Lower Canada is a different State. In Lower Canada, the French population outnumbers the English population by 10 to 1. It forms a compact group. It has its own government and its own Parliament. The French population truly is a distinct nation.

As you can see, honourable senators, the notion of distinct society goes back further than Meech Lake.

The Constitutional Act of 1791 established the foundation for a parliamentary system by granting a House of Assembly. French-Canadians will soon become familiar with all the complexities of the system. They would use this assembly efficiently to assert their rights and protect their culture. However, it was a source of problems as the English-Canadian government of Lower Canada was required to have its laws passed by a French-Canadian assembly.

From 1791 to 1837, there were many conflicts and indeed two rebellions, in 1837 and 1838. London reacted by sending Lord Durham to investigate. He would say in his report, and I quote:

I expected a conflict between a government and a people; I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state.

We were in 1839, and I draw your attention to the fact that he was not talking about a distinct society, but about two nations.

● (1650)

London solved the problem by bringing together both Canadas. Passed in 1840, the Union Act was supposed to eliminate the distinct society. But it brought the opposite. British people, who came to United Canada in thousands, chose to live in what was to become Ontario and farther west. The assimilation of the distinct society proposed by Durham was a failure.

In spite of its new minority status, the distinct society became progressively more assertive and constantly claimed its right to protect its own language, culture and economy. Confrontation between representatives of the two peoples never ceased in Parliament. From 1854 on, ministerial instability was such that Canada became unmanageable.

A new direction was needed; it was to be Confederation, which became effective in 1867. As Jean-Charles Bonenfant wrote:

"Confederation became a reality because English Canadians needed French Canadians to be part of it . . ." And he added

that French Canadians wanted federalism to guarantee their survival. They wanted a Quebec where the French Canadian majority would control its own destiny. But at the same time, they accepted that an extraordinary pro-

tection of the English-speaking minority of Quebec be entrenched in the Constitution.

We should note, honourable senators, that from Conquest to Confederation, nobody ever denied, nor necessarily approved, the existence of the distinct society.

During its first few decades, the Canadian Federation was plagued by crises which showed its fragility. We were reminded today of the Louis Riel case, but we could mention the issue of the schools in Manitoba and New Brunswick, and the two crises of the conscription.

We must add to those conflicts the constitutional issues which were and are still the subject of numerous commissions.

In 1953, Maurice Duplessis, the premier of Quebec, formed the Tremblay Commission, which tabled its report in 1956. The commissioners reaffirmed the distinctiveness of the Quebec people. They wrote:

Because of its history as well as the cultural character of its people, whatever we may say, Quebec is not a province like the others. It speaks for one of the two ethnic groups that founded the Confederation.

The Laurendeau-Dunton Commission on bilingualism and biculturalism, named in 1963, came up with the same conclusions recognising the distinct society.

In his personal journal, which is fascinating reading, André Laurendeau asked realistically, in 1964, the question which is still haunting us today:

*How do we fit the minimum demand of French-Canadians into the maximum acceptable to English-Canadians.*

The question is blunt and unequivocal. A year later he wrote:

*How can we integrate, without stifling it, the New Quebec which has been emerging since 1959?*

Many realized that time was running out and that one could no longer ignore in all impunity the Canadian reality, at a time when Quebec was undergoing its quiet revolution. I am thinking in particular of Walter Gordon, former minister of Finance in Ottawa, who wrote in 1966:

*Time has come to realize that Quebec is not a province like the others . . . The revolution in Quebec makes it now essential that the English element recognizes and accepts that fact.*

Twenty-five years after these pronouncements, we are still asking ourselves the same questions. Yet, in 1963, Prime Minister Pearson was saying:

*Quebec is much more than a province within our Confederation, because it is the heartland of a people: In fact, it is really a nation within a nation.*

In 1979, the Commission on Canadian unity, better known as the Pépin-Robarts Commission, would reach the same conclusions. According to the commissioners,

Quebec is and will remain basically French, both linguistically and ethnically. In this respect, it is highly distinct from the rest of Canada.