

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Ramsey Cook on the Quebec elections

Last Monday night, the people of Quebec elected a majority Parti Quebecois government, a party which is committed largely to the separation of Quebec from the rest of Canada. Excalibur talked to Canadian historian and York professor Ramsey Cook on Tuesday about the elections.

Professor Cook has written several books on the history and politics of Quebec, including *Canada and the French-Canadian question*.

By ANNA VAITIEKUNAS

EXCALIBUR: As a historian, what do you feel the implications for English Canada might be now that a Parti Quebecois government has been elected in Quebec?

COOK: The short-term implications might not be very serious at all. The long-term implications could of course, mean that the country will be divided into two countries and in a sense, three countries because Quebec would stand between the Maritimes and the rest of the country. Those implications could be very serious. One can hardly speculate at this point as to whether or not that kind of arrangement could have any permanence, whether or not the western provinces would want to succeed or form some new kind of association among themselves or with the United States, or something of that sort. So in answer to your question, the implications are simply enormous. I want to emphasize though that that's possibly fairly long term. The immediate implications for Canada may be very slight indeed because it depends on exactly what Monday's election meant.

But we do know several things about the election. We know, that the Parti Quebecois has elected a majority government something in the order of 70 seats. We know two other things as well. We know that that majority government was elected on the basis of a minority vote, 40 per cent of the popular vote roughly, 40-41 per cent of the popular vote. That's hardly an enormous mandate to carry out very revolutionary policies. We know also that the polls prior to the election showed that while the Parti Quebecois was running very strongly, the number of people who actually supported independence was much smaller, perhaps only half of the people who supported the Parti Quebecois actually voted for them in the belief that independence would come. We know moreover that during the election campaign, it was the strategy of Mr. Levesque's party to play down the independence issue and to emphasize the issues of good government, economic conditions, honesty in government, and so on.

So that it seems to me that what one can say most obviously about Monday's election is that it was, as elections often are, the defeat of a government, more perhaps than anything else. The enormous number of Quebecers, something of the order of 65 per cent, voted against the Bourassa government. But what precisely they voted for is perhaps a little more complicated. So the implications for English Canada depends completely on how the new government interprets its mandate. Mr. Levesque said during the election, and he said again last night, that he does not believe that the independence question can be solved until there is a referendum. He's never said precisely when that would be.

EXCALIBUR: Why did Bourassa lose so dramatically?

COOK: Well I think that all the evidence seems to suggest various kinds of discontent. I think that one of the reasons that he lost is because he won so well in 1973. He had more than one hundred seats; the opposition was reduced to almost nothing, so he was very careless in power. He seemed to me to have been very conservative and very careless. There's been more than a hint of scandal, there's been a very bad situation with relation to the labour unions, both the white collar and the blue collar

unions. It seems to me that there is a general feeling in the French speaking community that this government was too strong and wasn't doing very much for the people as a result of it. In the English speaking and in the ethnic community there was the problem of Bill 22, of the language question. In the English speaking community and the ethnic community there was a serious concern about the language question. The feeling that the Bourassa government was, in effect, forcing people to become French-speaking. Even worse than that, in a sense, the feeling that they didn't really know what the Bourassa government was doing in the field of language policy. I think that new immigrants especially felt that they couldn't get straight answers from the Bourassa government.

EXCALIBUR: Would you then say that the Parti Quebecois was elected as an alternative to the Bourassa government or are there a substantial number of people who really do want to separate Quebec from the rest of Canada?

COOK: Well, I think there are a substantial number of people who want to separate Quebec from the rest of Canada. I think the 70 members of the National Assembly in Quebec all want to separate Quebec from Canada, and we shouldn't forget that. I think those people who were nominated and were elected are clearly committed to the proposition that Quebec should separate from Canada. Now, I think that secondly there are something of the order as there has been for 15 years between 10 and 20 per cent of the people who really want to separate from Canada as a first priority. That's the thing they want most. This has grown, but not very enormously in the last ten years, but it has grown. I would think that about half of the vote of the PQ was a separatist vote. But the other half wasn't. It was a vote given by people who were not necessarily anti-separatist but that wasn't what was on their mind when they voted. What was on their mind were more concrete immediate bread and butter kinds of issues. Then of course there is the 60 per cent of the vote that didn't go the PQ at all, most of which isn't separatist. However, I must add to that I think the fact that there are people who are separatists who don't vote for the PQ. They vote for the Union Nationale, some of them even vote for the Liberals. But certainly more than 50 per cent of the people of Quebec still have not decided to be separatists. But they have elected a government which has, in its platform, the proposition that its ultimate goal is to separate Quebec from Canada.

EXCALIBUR: Would you agree then with Jean Marchand's statement that separatism as a social force, is still an academic question as opposed to a political reality?

COOK: Oh, I don't think its academic at all. I don't think its academic in any sense. It's not possible for it to be anything but a practical reality when you have a government in power with a majority which is in a position where it can in a sense set the rules of the game for the next four years. This is a very clear immediate and, present reality. Now if there was a referendum tomorrow, I don't think for a moment that this would lead to a conclusion that a majority of Quebecers would lead to separation. But Mr. Levesque isn't going to call a referendum tomorrow, he won't hold a referendum until he thinks he's in a position where he can come pretty close to winning it. And he said during the election that if he didn't win the first one that he was prepared to try it again. Oh, I think that Mr. Marchand, if he said that, is substantially under-estimating the significance of this phenomena.

EXCALIBUR: Do you think Rene Levesque can afford to push separatism? Can he afford to watch investment and other capital leave the province?

COOK: I think Mr. Levesque's position is



Danny Lam photo

I think the strategy of the Parti Quebecois will not be a direct confrontation over the precise issue of independence but that they will go to the federal government and ask for certain powers... which they probably won't get.

very difficult indeed. He's come into office when the general condition of the Quebec economy and the general social outlook of the province is not very good. He himself has said that and used that in the campaign to defeat the Bourassa government by saying that the economy is in bad shape and that it needs to be put into better shape. For example, he doesn't take any steps towards separation, but simply acts as another provincial government, and makes the system work very well, restores prosperity, gets people back to work, and cleans up the administration of Quebec, people might say 'well he did all that within the structure of Confederation, what do we need to get out for. If, on the other hand, the economy goes from bad to worse, people might say, 'well look at that guy, if he can't run the province as it is, how is he going to run it if we were separate'. On the other hand, and I think that this is the dangerous situation, if things get worse in Quebec, it will be the natural and inevitable tendency of the PQ to say 'the reason we can't solve this problem is the reason we've always said — we're stuck in this straightjacket of Confederation. If we had the full powers of a national government, we would be able to deal with these problems, so let's get out of this federal system which is our main problem,' according to the PQ. They will say 'the reason we can't solve the problem now is because the English are dragging their feet, and because the federal government is putting every conceivable obstacle in our way, let's have a referendum and get out. It seems to me that he's faced with a very real dilemma. In a sense, he may be caught in a situation where he'll be damned if he does, and he'll be damned if he doesn't. My feeling is, contrary to what all the federal ministers said Monday, events will go very quickly. I think this day of final decision can't be put off for very long.

EXCALIBUR: Especially in light of the federal provincial conference in Ottawa

next month. What line do you think Levesque will take at this conference vis-a-vis the federal government? Will everything depend on how Prime minister Trudeau reacts to Levesque and the PQ party?

COOK: Yes, I think in a sense the reaction of one will spark reaction of some kind from the other. Mr. Trudeau last Monday night made his position very clear. He said that he accepted, naturally, the democratic decision of the electorate in the province of Quebec. And that, in his view, the government was elected purely as any other provincial government. If the first minister's conference takes place at all, and I frankly doubt that it will, the first thing that I think Levesque will say is 'that we're not interested in discussing the main issue,' that is bringing the constitution home and finding an amending procedure. He's going to say 'that's not of any interest to us because what we want to do is bring the constitution to Quebec.' The first thing I think Mr. Levesque will do in the field of federal-provincial relations will probably be to ask the federal government to give to Quebec and the other provinces certain specific powers the federal government probably will refuse. I think that will be the first stage in the ultimate confrontation. I think the strategy of the PQ will have to be not a direct confrontation over the precise issue of independence, but that they will want to go to the federal government and ask for certain powers, probably in expectation that they won't get any. Then they can go back to Quebec and say 'See, we've tried to work within this existing situation but asking for certain things that we felt are necessary for the well-being of Quebecers is intransigent. Levesque's government would then be able to say, 'We've tried and we've failed. We must have these powers therefore down the road in the distance I think we must turn to the ultimate question: 'Shall we, or shall we not withdraw from this federal system?'