

A special Gateway feature...

# 'For An Independent Quebec':

Independent of how events proceed from here, November 15, 1976 will be recorded as one of the most important dates in Canadian history. On that day Rene Levesque's Parti Quebecois was elected with a majority to Quebec's National Assembly: the first provincial government ever formed which is publicly dedicated to secession from the Canadian confederation.

This article by the PQ's leader is part of an essay which he wrote shortly before last fall's Quebec election: the advantage of nearly a year's hindsight makes his text doubly interesting. In it Mr. Levesque, quite confident of imminent electoral victory, explains some of the aspirations of the new separatist government.

Viewing Quebec independence as a natural evolution of our history — or rather, as a cure for what he sees as the great aberration of history, i.e.; the Canadian confederacy — Mr. Levesque seeks to assure us that when it comes, the means employed will be peaceful, democratic and orderly. Whatever the means, Levesque's most important argument is that, in his view, independence is inevitable: **Quebec will separate.**

For an Independent Quebec was originally printed in *Foreign Affairs*. It is excerpted here, as the first of a series, from a forthcoming book, **Divided We Stand**, edited by poet and English prof. Gary Geddes. The book — a collection of essays, articles, and poems by prominent Canadian authors and thinkers on the Quebec question, national unity, and the definition of Canada in general — is expected out by November 1st of this year. It will be published by Peter Martin Associates, Toronto, with proceeds to be used to set up an academic or creative scholarship called the **Andre Laurendeau Award.**

**Divided We Stand** deals, in Geddes' words, with "The price of being Canadian, which is the price of cultural dualism, the price of not being American, and the price of a federal-provincial division of powers." The book is no "Canada Day" celebration; no propaganda ploy aimed at selling a nation like a brand of toothpaste. For as the editor notes in his introduction to **Divided We Stand**: "The threat to Canadian unity is not Quebec, or the Parti Quebecois, but the federal government, which has consistently soft-pedalled on the vital issues of cultural and economic nationalism."

Levesque's essay will be the first of a number from the book to be printed in the Gateway. It conveniently acts as a starting point; a credible thesis against which the other contributor's articles may create an equally credible antithesis.

The Gateway is privileged to preview **Divided We Stand** and thanks editor Gary Geddes for permission to do so.

What does Quebec want? The question is an old cliché in Canadian political folklore. Again and again, during the more than thirty years since the end of World War II, it's been raised whenever Quebec's attitudes made it the odd man out in the permanent pull and tug of our federal-provincial relations. In fact, it's a question which could go back to the British conquest of an obscure French colony some fifteen years before American Independence, and then run right through the stubborn survival of those 70,000 settlers and their descendants during the following two centuries.

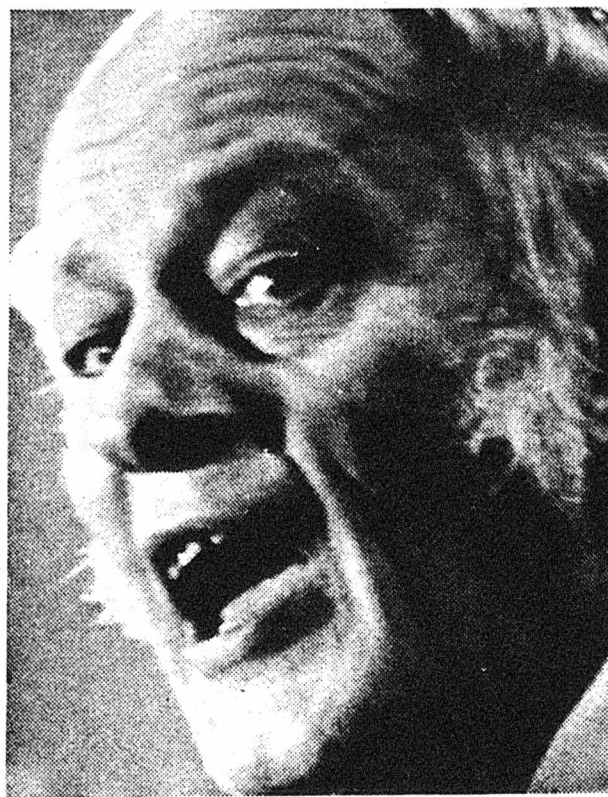
By now, there are some six million of them in Canada not counting the progeny of the many thousand who were forced by poverty, especially around the turn of the century, to migrate to the United States and now constitute substantial "Franco" communities in practically all the New England states.

But Quebec remains the homeland. All along the valley of the St. Lawrence, from the Ottawa River down to the Gaspé Peninsula and the great Gulf, the ancient settlements which grew into the big cities of Montreal and Quebec, in hundreds of smaller towns and villages from the American border to the mining centres and power projects in the north, there are now some 4.8 million Quebecois. That's 81 per cent of the

population of the largest and second most populous of Canada's ten provinces.

What does French Quebec want? Sometime during the next few years the question may be answered. And there are growing possibilities that the answer could very well be — independence.

Launched in 1967-68, the Parti Quebecois, whose platform is based on political sovereignty, now fills the role of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition in the National Assembly — as we nostalgically designate our provincial legislature. In its first electoral test in 1970 it had already won 24 per cent of the votes. Then in 1973, a second general election saw it jump to 30 per cent and, although holding only six out of 100 seats, become what our British-type parliamentary system calls the Official Opposition, i.e.; the government's main interlocutor and challenger.



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The next election might come any time now. Whenever it does, all available indicators, including an impressive series of public opinion polls, tell us that for the first time the outcome is totally uncertain. The present provincial government, a branch of the same Liberal Party which also holds power at the federal level under Pierre Trudeau, is obviously on the way out. It has been in power six years, and ever since its second and Pyrrhic victory in 1973 (102 seats) it has been going steadily downhill. Apart from a host of social and economic troubles, some imported but many more of its own making, there is around it a pervasive smell of incompetence and corruption. The scandal-ridden atmosphere surrounding the Olympic construction sites and the incredible billion-dollar deficit which is now forecast are just the more visible aspects of a rather complete political and administrative disaster.

Looking for an alternative, the French voter is now leaning quite clearly toward the Parti Quebecois. In that "national" majority, we are at least evenly matched with Premier Robert Bourassa's Liberals, and probably ahead. As for the anglophone minority of more than a million people, whose natural attachment to the status quo normally makes them the staunchest supporters of the reigning federalist party, they are confused as never before. Composed of a dwindling proportion of Anglo-Saxon descendants of eighteenth-century conquerors or American Loyalists, along with those of nineteenth-century Irish immigrants and a steadily growing "ethnic" mosaic (Jewish, Italian, Greek, etc.), in the crunch most of this minority will probably end up, as usual, supporting the Liberals. But not with the traditional unanimity. Caught between the Charybdis of dissatisfaction and the Scylla of secessionism, many are looking for some kind of "third force." Others, especially younger people, are ready to go along with the Parti Quebecois whose minority vote should be a little less marginal next time than last.

So, all in all, there is quite a serious possibility that an "independentist" government will soon be elected in Quebec. At first sight, this looks like a dramatically rapid development, this burgeoning and flowering

over a very few years of a political emancipation movement in a population which, until recently, is commonly referred to as quiet old Quebec. But in its success would mean, very simply, the normal healthy end result of a long and laborious national evolution.

Let us suppose it does happen, and Quebec peacefully elects such a government. What then?

The way we see it, it would have to go some like this. There is a new Quebec government which is totally dedicated to political independence. But the same Quebec, for the time being, is still very much

component of federal Canada, with its quite legitimate body of elected representatives in Ottawa. This is first of all, for at least a try at negotiation. But from talk between two equally legitimate and diametrically opposed levels of government, without any further pressures from the population — that would be a first in Canadian political history! Obviously, there would have to be the referendum which the Parti Quebecois proposes in order to get the decisive yes or no answer to the tired question: What *does* Quebec want? (This was precisely the procedure by which only new province to join Confederation during recent democratic past, Newfoundland, was consulted in 1948-49 about whether or not to opt in. So why about opting out?) If the answer should be no, there's nothing to do but wait for the momentum change to keep on working until we all find whether or not there is finally to be a nation here. If the answer is yes, out, then the pressure is on Ottawa along with a rather dramatic surge of outside attention and we all get a privileged opportunity to study the recently inked Helsinki Declaration and other documents about self-determination for all people.

Fully confident of the basic integrity of Canadian democracy, and just as conscious that any silliness would be very costly for both sides, we firmly believe that the matter would then be brought to a negotiated settlement. Especially since the Parti Quebecois is from aiming at any kind of mutual hostility or a Berlin Wall, will then repeat its standing offer of a kind of association, once it is agreed to get rid of the illusion of deep unshakable national unity when in two quite real and distinct entities exist in an obstinate and increasingly morbid majority/minority relationship. Our aim is simply full equality by the means through which a smaller nation can reasonably expect to achieve it with a larger one: self-government. But we are definitely not unaware of the shock that such a break, after so long an illusion of eternal bond to send through the Canadian political fabric.

We do not accept the simplistic domino theory whereby Quebec's departure is presented as the beginning of fatal dislocation, with "separatism" spreading in all directions like a galloping disease among the balkanized bits and pieces are swallowed up by a huge maw next doot. In spite of the somewhat uncharacteristic of its national identity and its excessive satellization by the American economic and cultural empire, Canada-without-Quebec has enough difference left, sufficient traditions and institutional originality, to withstand the extraction of its "body" and find a way to go on from there. It might very well turn out to be a heaven-sent opportunity to revitalize the overcentralized and ridiculously bureaucratic federal system, that century-old sacred cow which at the moment, nobody dares to touch seriously for fear of encouraging Quebec's subversive leanings!

Be that as it may, we know there would be a traumatic moment and a delicate transition to go through which things might go wrong between quite a while; or else, one would hope, start going wrong as never before. With this strange new cold war between Quebec on the map between Ontario and the Maritime provinces, Canada must be kept from feeling itself "Pakistanized", so we must address ourselves with much delay to the problem of keeping a land bridge open with as much free flow of people and goods as is humanly possible; as much and more as there would imagine, between Alaska and the main continent of the United States over the western land bridge.

Such a scenario would call, as a decisive first step, for a customs union, as full-fledged as both countries could consider to be mutually advantageous. We have often considered, been proposing that ever since the Parti Quebecois was founded, and naturally meeting with the most resonant silence in all orthodox federalist circles. But in the midst of that silence, not a single responsible politician, nor for that matter a single important businessman, has been heard to declare,