

QUEBEC'S PREMIER BOURASSA STEPS DOWN AT 60

Canapress / Jacques Boissinot



Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa, 60, announced his impending retirement on September 14.

Quebec's governing Liberal Party, which must face elections against the

separatist Parti Québécois (PQ) by the fall of 1994, will meet in Quebec City on January 30 to select Bourassa's successor. Treasury Board President Daniel Johnson, 48, is generally considered to be the front-runner.

The outgoing premier, who will remain in office until the new Liberal leader is chosen, said that one of the reasons he was making his announcement now was to leave his successor the option of calling the election in either the spring or fall of 1994. Bourassa caught many political observers off-guard with his decision.

In a rare public display of emotion during a press conference at Quebec's National Assembly, where he was a dominant figure over the last quarter century, Bourassa acknowledged: "It is not an easy day." He went on to reflect that when he was first elected premier at the age of 36 in 1970, many thought they had taken on "a student." Now, all those years later, he added, "here I am."

The youngest leader in the history of the Quebec Liberal Party in 1970, and youngest premier in Quebec history, he became the youngest former premier on his defeat by the PQ in 1976. Later, in 1983, he also became the first person in Canadian history to regain the leadership of his party.

Returned to power with a sweeping mandate in 1985, he was reelected in 1989 for a fourth term. Bourassa's time in office covered 15 of the last 24 years. He governed through some of the most turbulent periods in modern Quebec history, including the October kidnapping crisis of 1970, the Oka crisis of 1990, and the negotiation and subsequent rejection of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional accords of 1987 and 1992.

Throughout, Bourassa remained committed to Quebec's place in the Canadian constitutional family. "Canada, with all its problems," he said at his news conference, "remains by far one of the most enviable countries in the world."

His public life was defined by the continuous debate over Quebec's role in the Canadian federation. A cultural nationalist whose government passed Quebec's first law proclaiming French its official language in 1974, Bourassa nevertheless was regarded as a strong defender of the Canadian federal option.

He played a leading supporting role in the 1980 referendum campaign which defeated the PQ option of sovereignty-association with Canada, and on his return to office negotiated the Meech Lake constitutional accord which, among other things, would have recognized Quebec as a "distinct society within Canada."

Quebec's economic development in the Bourassa era was highlighted by the mammoth, multi-billion dollar James Bay hydroelectric projects in northern Quebec, which created thousands of

construction jobs in the 1970s and 1980s. Much of the additional capacity generated at James Bay was destined for export markets in the northeastern United States. The utility's plan for a companion project in the province's far northern Great Whale region is a priority for the Quebec government but faces challenges from aboriginal and environmental groups.

The last three years of Bourassa's premiership have been marked by a private struggle that played out as a public drama—his battle with cancer. Diagnosed with malignant melanoma in the summer of 1990, Bourassa twice underwent treatment at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. Though his cancer is in remission, Bourassa acknowledged that family and health considerations were important factors in his decision to retire from politics.

Editorial reaction has been virtually unanimous in positive assessments of Bourassa's career. As the *Toronto Globe and Mail* commented: "Mr. Bourassa has attained substantial stature as a politician. He has done so on personal merits—civility, tenacity, intelligence, rationality and charm—that justify the respect in which he is held."

The Washington Post observed: "Mr. Bourassa has been the reasonable and reliable alternative to Quebec's flamboyant separatists. Mr. Bourassa has negotiated tirelessly with the federal government for more protection for Quebec's French heritage. At the same time he has reminded Quebec's voters of the substantial costs and burdens that secession would impose."

All figures are in Canadian dollars.
The official noon exchange rate on
September 30 was US\$1 = C\$1.3358.

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