

# Québec

## *A second look*

### *Québec's history tale of regimes*

**QUÉBEC'S HISTORY IS NOT** its own in the true sense of "history". It is the story of regimes, of other countries dominating all aspects of Québécois life.

The first dominating power was France. After French settlers had established themselves in New France, they were not allowed to remain in peace. The French upper classes and government saw great potential to exploit the fur trade in particular in this new land, only inhabited by "lowly redskins". They did not release their grasp until the British defeated them on the Plains of Abraham in 1759.

After a long siege which destroyed much of Québec and neighbouring towns, farms, crops, etc., the British took over Québec. Montreal fell in 1763, and the Treaty of Paris drafted in the same year gave Québec to the British as another colony.

The French only kept St. Pierre et Miquelon as a result of the treaty. The province of Québec as it is geographically known today was formed. Any Frenchmen or residents of the province wishing to leave Québec had eighteen months to do so. If they wanted to sell their possessions, the English were the only buyers.

**THIS BLATANT OPPRESSION** was the first of many steps taken to prevent the people of the "province" from achieving what they wanted, particularly the control of their lives and preservation of their language.

The next big move was made in 1810. After a long series of disputes between the Lower Canadian Assembly and the majority-holding, Parti Canadien, over a bill excluding judges from the assembly, Governor James Craig dissolved it, and suspended the Constitution. He also ordered troops into the major cities. Three leading French political figures were jailed; one of them, Pierre Bedard was held without bail for a year.

After the Russell report in 1837, the British government refused to allow responsible government in both Upper and Lower Canada. The French population, led by Joseph Papineau began to form guerilla organizations. On November 26, British authorities ordered the arrests of 26 French leaders and then attacked rebel positions.

In a series of pitched battles, a dozen soldiers were killed and over a hundred wounded. The Patriotes' leadership retreated to US territory from where they carried out raids over the next 18 months. In reprisal, the British burned several villages.

The Constitution was again suspended until the Union of 1841 came into effect as a device aimed at submerging the French-Canadians by a union with Upper Canada.

**THE CATHOLIC CLERGY** refused to support the Patriotes. They wanted to make the people believe their mission in life was related to spiritual matters, rather than daily realities. At the same time, they persuaded the people to spend their money on the church, instead of themselves. They also instilled in the people the idea that their role on this earth was to be either a missionary to convert the heathens, a civilizer of the country or a farmer, who could produce food for the Church and everyone except himself.

The act of confederation was concluded in 1867. Despite what the history books tell of the union of "two founding peoples" and of the advantages for all concerned, there was a lot of dissatisfaction at the time. Nova Scotia and the other Maritime provinces objected because they would lose their present autonomy.

Lower Canada (Québec) lost even more.

The new constitution clearly favoured the English-speaking provinces and their inhabitants, particularly those in Ontario. It further reduced any chance French-speaking people would have to determine their future. The federal government became a centralized government, holding all the important powers. In terms of representation in the House of Commons, Québec was left with one third, instead of one half of a voice in the country. Even a petition signed by 20,000 people in Québec could not defer Parliament from instituting confederation.

**THE MAIN PROPONENTS OF THE UNION** were the merchants and the upper classes who saw a chance to profit by having easy access to such ports as Montreal, Quebec and those in the Maritimes. There was also protection from the Americans and a French or Québécois rebellion.

The situation did not change much until the First World War. In 1916, with only 4.5% of the army consisting of French-speaking men, Prime Minister Borden brought down conscription. Mass demonstrations broke out in Québec. The summer of 1916 saw

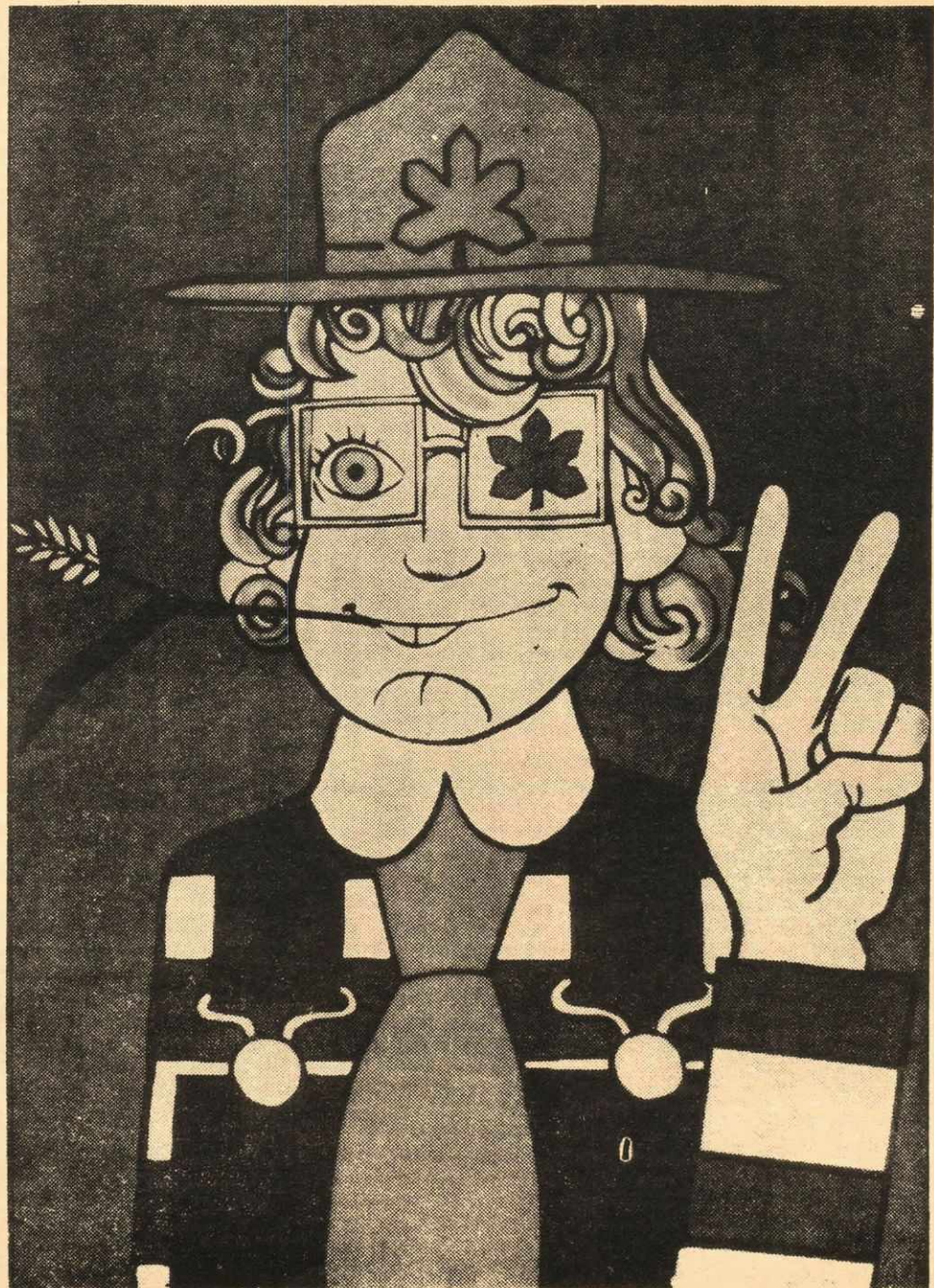
many demonstrations against conscription and even Borden himself.

While the Québécois rebelled, debate dragged on in Parliament. Finally in the spring of 1918, after the War Measures Act suspended civil liberties, conscription became unavoidable for the Québécois.

Hundreds of them took to the woods to escape from the hunt for eligible men. On March 29, after the federal police arrested a man for not producing military exemption papers, the Québécois revolted, burning down an RCMP station and the enlistment bureau files.

On April 1, despite pleas from all quarters, the people took to the streets with makeshift guns firing on the occupation troops. The soldiers machine-gunned the civilians, killing four and wounding over 100. Fifty-eight arrests were made.

**WHEN THE WAR ENDED**, it was the Americans who had really won. The English lost their dominance in Canada and were gradually replaced by the USA. The war had stimulated the American economy and allowed the US financial and industrial institutions to tighten their hold on Canada.



Supplement compiled by  
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