

Kierans attacks centralism

— Blames Separatism on Ottawa's Arrogance

by Anne M. Harris

Addressing the Political Science Department's "Friday Colloquium," Eric Kierans traced the roots of separatism in Quebec to the erosion of Provincial power in Canada as a whole. The one-time colleague of Rene Levesque in Lesage's Quebec government, former Trudeau cabinet minister and professor of economics at McGill challenged his audience to look beyond the existing crisis for the deeper causes of Quebec's sense of alienation.

Warning that the Parti Quebecois "actually mean what they say" about seeking a mandate for independence, Kierans argued that separation need not be the inevitable outcome. A referendum vote of "80 to 20% (against) would end the question, for a generation at least", and according to Kierans "with the right scenario this could happen". The scenario would see Pierre Trudeau "negotiate diminution in the level of centralism".

Prof. Kierans introduced his argument by outlining the three central problems facing Quebec in Canada, and swiftly dismissed two of these as insufficient rationale for separation.

On the issue of cultural autonomy Kierans pointed to the survival and

success of Quebec's television industry as only one indication of the better health of popular culture there than in English Canada. "They have more home-grown T.V. than the rest of Canada." Cultural determination, he suggested, is not an area where blame can be placed on the central government. "The remedy here is in the hands of the provinces." He argued that the 5 million Quebecois have fared well in Canada where there is "a constitutional obligation to the French speaking", but painted a bleak future for French culture among 250 million English-speaking North Americans. He warned that there would be "no give in American attitudes toward a second language", citing the problems of 13 million Spanish-Americans forced to accept the collective American culture. "Independence for cultural reasons is suicide" he concluded.

Moving into the much-discussed area of economic survival after separation, Kierans cast doubt on the notion of a common market association with the new Canada. "It would take 15 to 20 years to accomplish this" and the economy of Quebec could not wait that long for establishment of trade relations. He further argued that "natural economic ties would be with the U.S. and talk of association with the Prairies or Maritimes is ridiculous." Economic ties with the U.S.,

he maintained, would not be in the form of a common market and he placed Quebec's hopes for economic autonomy from the U.S. beyond the realm of reality.

following Duplessis' critical lead. The discrediting of Duplessis prevented effective opposition to central domination.

Kierans suggested that the

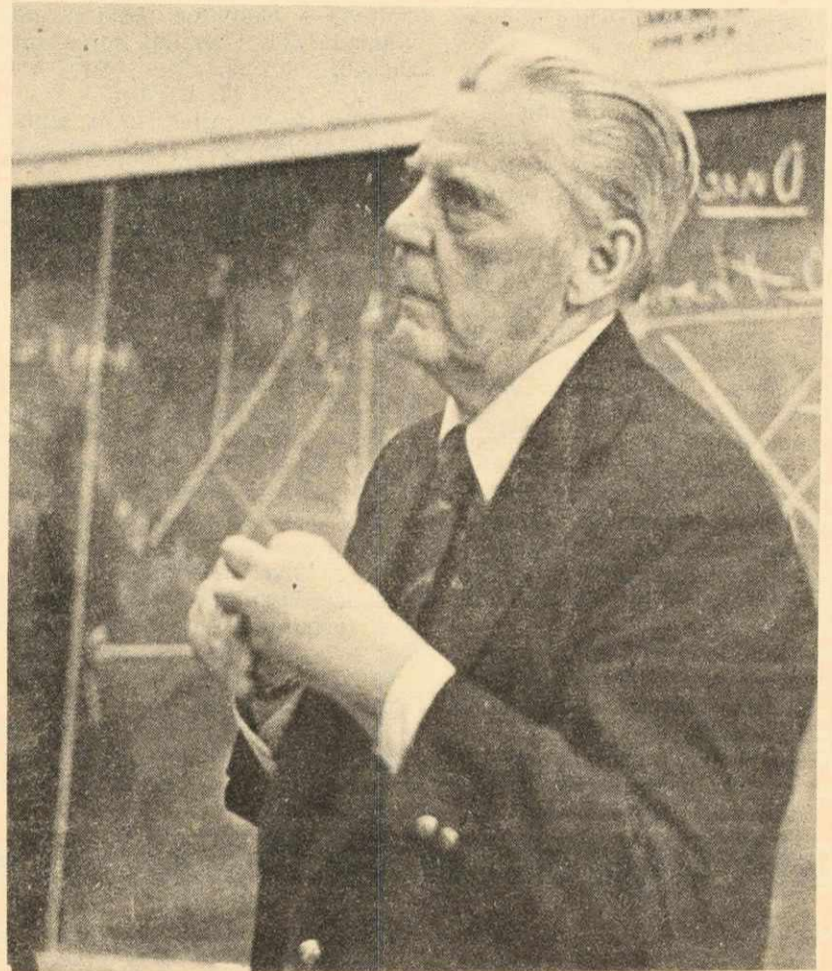


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Kierans in colloquium

Kierans accepts the desire of Quebec nationalists for continued economic association with Canada but characterized the idea as "being separated from your wife and living with her too". Kierans concluded that in fact Quebec does not see English Canada as the villain. Speaking as a Quebecois he suggested that "we have thumbed our nose not at English Canada; we have thumbed it at Ottawa." His explanation for this view concerned the third problem facing Quebec.

"A revolution in our constitution and society took place without the people having any say." The first step in this, he said, was the 1940 Rowell-Sirois report which recommended equal access to a high level of social services for all Canadians. The assumption of central planning apparent in this policy, he argued, precluded survival of strong provincial governments. Revenue taxation loaned by the provinces to Ottawa during World War II provided Kierans' second step toward centralization. The constitutional division of fiscal control before the war had been 30 to 70% in favour of provincial administration. With 83% of tax revenues collected by Ottawa because of wartime adjustments, this level of control was exactly reversed. "Premier Duplessis was the only one to see this and speak up" according to Kierans, and the principle Quebec problem thus began with the lack of support from fellow premiers.

The third factor in the move to centralization came with the Keynesian theory that governments should assume a more active role in fiscal matters. As Kierans pointed out, the theory did not specify which level of government in Canada should assume this role. In the atmosphere of Rowell-Sirois and wartime paternalism every premier except Duplessis and Tommy Douglas, in Saskatchewan, accepted the view that Ottawa should control fiscal planning. According to Kierans of 'treason' was raised by Ottawa to discourage premiers from

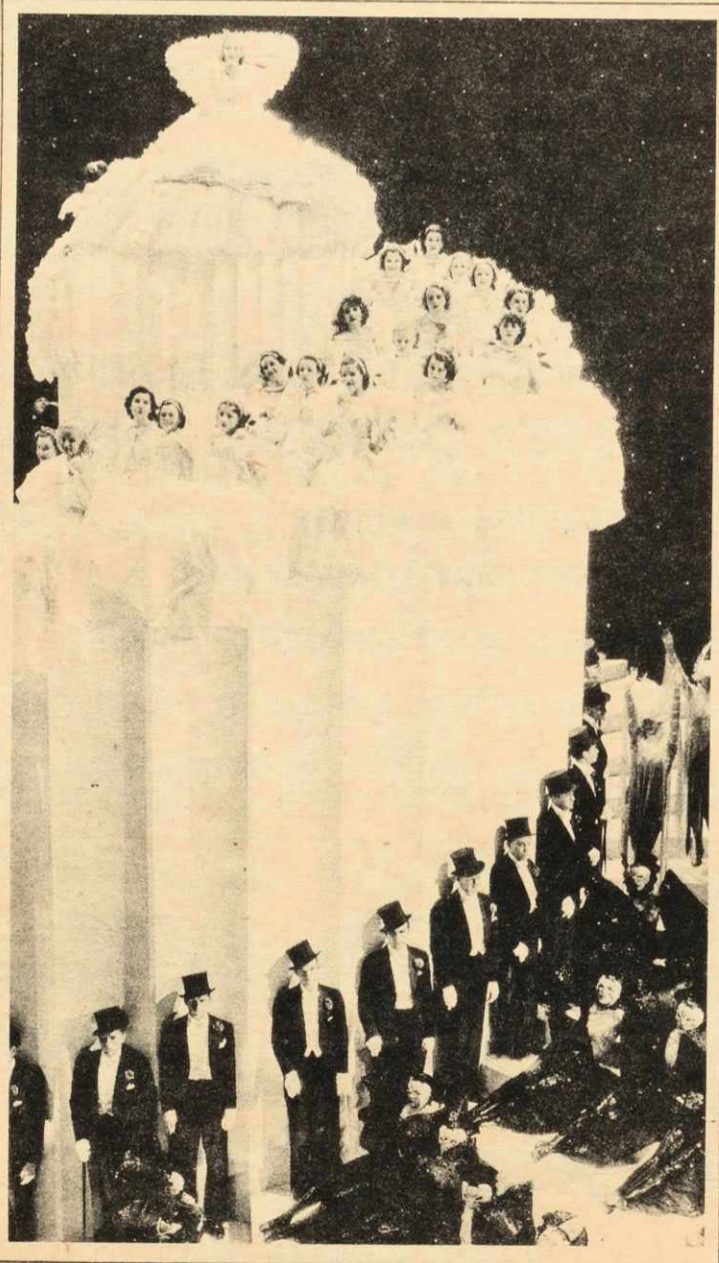
growth of central power and arrogance was best exemplified in Lester Pearson's announcement of universal Medicare at the end of a federal-provincial conference, during which the policy could have been thoroughly discussed by all of the provinces. Recalling that health care is a responsibility of the provinces according to the BNA Act, Kierans described his own response at the time — "You get bitter!"

Bitterness at the high-handedness of Ottawa, according to Kierans is the root cause of alienation in Quebec. It is centralism, and not federalism, in Kierans' perspective that makes it impossible for Quebecois to remain a part of Canada.

Kierans reminded his audience that in Washington recently Trudeau assured that there "would be accommodations." "With the right changes, Levesque is a dead duck" according to Kierans. Instead of negotiating the terms of separation, Trudeau must negotiate a lessening of central control in the hands of "the arrogant and insolent civil service".

Asked by a Gazette reporter whether he favoured stronger provincial governments, Kierans emphasized that this is the only means to reverse the threat of separation. "If at any time in the past ten years any one other province had demanded a recovery of provincial control similar to that demanded by Quebec, relations with Quebec would not have become as serious as they are today."

What Eric Kierans was saying, in effect, was that the problems faced by Quebec in terms of autonomy in decision-making are really no different from those faced by the other nine provinces. Quebec, however, has a stronger sense of injustice, rooted in historical opposition to the erosion of provincial powers. The election of Rene Levesque could provide the means by which all provinces and enforce their demands for restoration of constitutional divisions of powers.



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