

We Quebecers are therefore not the damned of the earth, even in the eyes of the harshest critics of the present system. Those critics may have denounced the "crimes" committed under federalism, pointed out certain very real cases of injustice of which we were the victims, but they have to admit that we are not emerging from a century of confederal cohabitation with our Anglophone compatriots as an impoverished people -- quite the contrary. The White Paper does stress that the situation we find ourselves in is not the result of "some political system". It follows none the less from this description that Canadian federalism, in spite of its faults, has not prevented Quebecers from developing their culture and their economy. That is probably what is making half of them (perhaps more-- we will know on May 21) hesitate over the venture being proposed to them.

They know from personal experience that the Canadian federal system is one of the most decentralized in the world and that Quebec enjoys a great deal of autonomy. The government of the province has exclusive powers in some very important areas: it is master in its own house in the area of education, is sole administrator of justice in its own territory, exploits its vast natural resources as it sees fit, has its own police force, is free to raise any kind of loan where it wishes and how it wishes in Canada or abroad without even notifying the federal government, legislates in the area of language, and has a great deal of authority, often the lion's share, in social security and urban development. With the exception of national defence and foreign affairs, there are hardly any areas from which it is excluded. As far as foreign affairs are concerned, it does have general delegations in several countries-- France, for example-- and is a member of the principal organization of La Francophonie internationale, the Agency for Cultural and Technical Co-operation, as a participating government.

It is therefore not, as people in other countries often tend to believe, an ostracized, powerless Francophone community, paralysed in its development by an oppressive system and unitary institutions which deny it all right to be different, to use an expression in vogue with those who advocate sovereignty. Certain minorities in the Anglophone provinces are probably right in reproaching their provincial governments for not complying with their cultural aspirations. However, it is by virtue of the same exclusive powers which Quebec enjoys that some governments refuse their French-speaking communities certain rights.

It is obvious that there are serious reasons for discontent, since we are now facing a crisis situation. However, a very large number of Quebecers still believe that it would be easier to find the solutions to their problems under renewed federalism than it would be if the proposed secession were to occur.