

Politics:

A couple of Oxbridge men face each other in Quebec

by Joseph MacSween

In 1974 in French Canada, home of the unexpected, you find Premier Robert Bourassa, an Oxford man, facing Opposition leader Jacques-Yvan Morin, Cambridge, across the floor of the Quebec national assembly.

"The test of a free country is to examine the status of the body that corresponds to Her Majesty's Opposition," Mr. Morin told the assembly one day, with an accusing glance at the premier.

At first those words might seem strange coming from a man dedicated to taking Quebec out of the Canadian Confederation of which Her Majesty is Queen. But Professor Morin is a frank admirer of the British parliamentary system, though he and his Parti Quebecois feel Confederation has been bad for Quebec. He is parliamentary chief of the separatist party of which Rene Levesque, who suffered personal defeat in the Quebec general election last Oct. 29, is founder and leader. Mr. Morin and Mr. Levesque contend that the stunning victory achieved by the Bourassa Liberals — they won all but eight seats in the 110-member assembly — causes them to dismiss the tiny Opposition in a haughty and amused manner.

Why did the election turn out the way it did?

With the economy on an upswing, most observers saw federalism versus Quebec independence as the sole clearcut issue in the 33-day campaign, which was conducted under a new electoral law with a new electoral map. While Quebec's role as the only majority French-language territory in North America was reflected in the policies of all four parties in the campaign support polarized largely toward the Liberals and the Parti Quebecois.

"Bourassa the Builder" won a greater victory than even he expected on the theme of economic federalism and cultural sovereignty, while two other non-separatist parties skidded badly. The 40-year-old premier, lawyer-economist from Harvard and Oxford, went to the polls in a year that has since been described by Guy Saint-Pierre, minister of industry and commerce, as the most prosperous Quebec has known in a quarter-century. A record 130,000 jobs were created. Unemployment dropped for the first time in seven years. Weekly wages rose at a rate of 7.1 per cent, matching Ontario though slightly below the Canadian average.

European and other investors, surveying a troubled world, are courting Quebec in a

way that could hardly have been imagined only a few winters ago. Montreal is undergoing the biggest building boom since Expo '67 as it prepares to stage the 1976 Olympic Games. Building cranes are busy as well amid the turrets of old-worldish Quebec City. So robust is the construction surge that citizens worry whether demolition hammers will destroy the character of their cities.

The Quebec election was picked by editors in a coast-to-coast poll by The Canadian Press as one of the biggest domestic news stories of the year, topped in impact only by the energy crisis. Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau commented that the provincial election transformed itself into a referendum in which "people voted for or against federalism instead of basing their choice on social or economic policies." He regretted such polarization: "You polarize the people for or against independence, but meanwhile the machinery of social and economic progress is not utilized. I prefer elections based on issues other than this sort of subject."

Support federalism

The Bourassa Liberals, espousing federalism without any ifs or buts, captured 102 seats though their own chief organizer later reported he had expected a maximum of 85. The Liberals won 55 per cent of the popular vote compared with 45 per cent in the 1970 election, when they came to power with 72 seats in a 108-member house. Redistribution changed the boundaries of virtually all constituencies and increased the total to 110 while reducing the weight of the vote in rural areas, where the conservative Union Nationale, the former official Opposition, and the populist Parti Creditiste, had found their greatest support in 1970.

Mr. Bourassa found proof in the election that the great majority of Quebecers, whether of French or other ethnic origin, see the future of their province within Confederation. But Rene Levesque countered that the Parti Quebecois attained, in fact, its "minimum" objective of official Opposition on 30 per cent of the popular vote, though winning only six seats, down one from 1970 when the PQ popular vote was 23 per cent. He renewed his demand for proportional representation — the German model is frequently mentioned — that would assure each party representation in the assembly at least roughly equivalent to its popular support.

A "caricature" — that was Mr. Levesque's word for the election outcome. And the Montreal *Gazette* commented editorially that redistribution had managed only to achieve fairer representation as between rural areas and rapidly growing districts. "But the political inequity has been augmented," the *Gazette* observed.

The Parti Quebecois won only about five per cent of the seats on 30 per cent of the popular vote. The Parti Creditiste, going into the election under a new leader, Yvon Dupuis, collected only two seats, though its 10 per cent of the vote was only slightly below 1970 when it came up with 12 seats. The Union Nationale, also under a new leader, Gabriel Loubier, went seat-less with five per cent of the vote.

"It has been shown over and over again at both the federal and provincial levels in Canada that the un-modified single-member constituency system can give extremely unfair results," said the *Gazette*.

Where does the election leave the separatist movement?

"Separatism in the strict sense of the word is a dead issue," says Premier Bourassa, whose analysis is that the increase in Parti Quebecois support represents protest — not separatist sentiment. He maintains some PQ supporters are simply not satisfied with his government while others do not consider the PQ a truly separatist party. But he has not estimated publicly what proportions of PQ votes were cast by such voters.

The second consecutive defeat for Mr. Levesque, who at age 51 was the oldest party leader in the campaign, raises obvious questions for the former Liberal minister, a leader in Quebec's Quiet Revolution of the early 1960s. He reported he will remain as leader at least until the next party convention in October and there is nothing remotely like a rebellion in the party against his leadership.

Levesque regrets

Professor Morin, a 42-year-old constitutional expert who is a graduate of McGill and Harvard as well as Cambridge, is on record as offering his seat in the legislature to Mr. Levesque and at least one other PQ member has done likewise. Mr. Morin, defeated in 1970, was elected in October and succeeded Camille Laurin, the former parliamentary leader, victim of the Liberal landslide.