

What it means to be canadian



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To no one's surprise, being a Canadian means different things to different people and it is quite commonplace for many Canadians to have multiple identities and even multiple allegiances. Predictably, it is not always clear how these multiple identities can fit into Canadian society and fault lines inevitably arise between those with different identities. The next several pages will look at the oldest fault-line of them all - at least among Canadians of European extraction - which is the fault line between English-speaking Canadians and French-speaking Canadians. It resonates with this writer because, frankly, so much of our constitutional and political history has been wrapped up with trying to resolve the grievances and insecurities of French Canadians. For those within and without this fault line, Canadian identity is complicated because those who fall outside it - people who have arrived from Asia or the Caribbean or from various other parts of the world - are subtly reminded, through official bilingualism and through the constant constitutional wrangling over whether or not Quebec is a distinct society, that perhaps they are not "true" or "authentic" Canadians in the way some other groups are. Further, for French Canadians, the battle has always been between identifying themselves as Canadians or identifying themselves as French-Canadians who deserve to stand apart from other Canadians.

This paper will look at the French-English divide in Canada by providing a brief historical overview of the tensions that have long existed between the two sides; as should be plain, the divide has been with us since before Confederation and will surely be with us for some time still to come. The paper will then turn to look at the introduction of Bill 101 in 1977 and how that ushered in a new era of strained English-French relations. With that out

of the way, the paper will subsequently observe how the fault line in general has complicated how people who associate with this group identity interact within Canadian society? In short, how have French Canadians (the minority group and the group most likely to be inflamed by linguistic considerations) interacted within Canada in light of the powerful divide that separates them and that exacerbates their hostilities towards one another? With special reference to French Canadians, what does it mean to them (or what has it meant to them recently) to be “Canadian” within the context of Canada? Last of all, the essay will explore what the future of the Canadian national identity might well be should tensions in this fault line increase or tensions in other fault lines increase. We can all imagine that simmering tensions will weaken the connective tissue that binds Canadians together and will create the prospect for the fragmentation of Canadian society unless common ground is found. The only saving grace for Canada with regards to this particular English-French divide is that demographic factors may end up resolving it by changing the composition of Quebec and of Canada so dramatically that the country no longer much cares about English-French hostilities.

Historical context of the English-French divide

The simple reality is that tensions between English and French have always been a part of the Canadian landscape. In the eighteenth century, the British and French bitterly wrestled for control of North America and, at the end of that century and in the early decades of the next one, there was a significant divide between the French Canadians of Lower Canada and the English elites of that province who deigned to pass measures from on high. Suffice it to <https://assignbuster.com/what-it-means-to-be-canadian/>

say, the educated professional elite that dominated the legislative assembly of Lower Canada from the turn of the nineteenth century onwards reacted most negatively to the disproportionate power held by (and general unresponsiveness exhibited by) the English-dominated colonial executive (executive council) and by the British-appointed governor (Greer, 1993). The end result was the ill-fated and violent 1837 Rebellion in Lower Canada when French-Canadian nationalists finally exploded in armed outrage at the refusal of the British government to seriously contemplate the democratization of the Legislative Council (Breakenridge Read, 2008).

As most students of Canadian history are aware, the aforementioned rebellion led to the Durham Report of 1839 wherein John Lambton, the Earl of Durham, advocated the cultural assimilation of French Canadian Lower Canada into a larger union with Lower Canada that would be dominated by the English. In effect, the best way to resolve the sense of grievance percolating in the hearts of French Canadians was to simply assimilate them (Van Male, 1997). For Lord Durham, what was tearing at the entrails of Lower Canada was a profound ethnic and linguistic conflict that fundamentally involved “two nations warring in the bosom of a single state” (quoted in Greer, 1993, p. 153). Ultimately, though tensions did lessen somewhat from their high water mark in the late 1830s, the old animosity never completely went away: at least one observer has written about “this tragic element in our history.... this is a country of ingrown prejudices.... unthinking, irrational and mean” (Lower Quoted in Cameron, 1997, p. 372). During the subsequent generations, the animus between French Canadians and English Canadians

always lurked just beneath the surface and could burst into flame at any moment.

In general, many of the most significant moments in Canadian history have either revolved around French-English rapprochement – the original constitutional deliberations of the 1860s – or have revolved around French-Canadian animosities spilling into the open: the Conscription Crises of Two World Wars; the Richard riots of the 1950s; the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and the federal government's attempts to head off Quebec nationalism; and the hotly-contested separatist referenda of 1980 and 1995. If one wants to understand the constitutional morass of the 1970s and 1980s (or 1990s) or if one wants to understand the original inspiration for Canadian multiculturalism (for more on how official multiculturalism under Trudeau was chiefly a response to Quebec nationalism, please see Tierney, 2007), then one must understand the fault line between English and French in Canada. Naturally, one of the greatest sources of tension of all was the battle on the part of French Canadians to protect their linguistic inheritance from the encroachment of the English majority.

Discussion and analysis: how has the divide between English and French, and the formulation of Bill 101, impacted the interactions between the two groups within Canada?

The 1977 Quebec language law was probably an inevitable consequence of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s; protecting French culture from Les Anglais, after all, necessarily meant protecting the language from desecration and from conquest at the hands of English. Specifically, French-

Canadian academics at the start of the 1970s wrote that the history of French Canada within the Canadian Confederation was very often a history of fighting to maintain the integrity of the French language. The passage of the Trudeau government's Official Language Law in 1970 saw French recognized as an official language in all federal affairs and constituted a victory of sorts, but the corresponding (and rather surprising) efforts of the Quebec government to pass Bill 63 - a bill that would have granted the English language official status in Quebec - was perceived as a direct threat to the primacy of the French language and viewed as setting the groundwork for the "anglification" of the population of Quebec (Angers, 1970).

Obviously, this raised the temperature in the room when it came to the ongoing debate about what measures should be taken to protect the French language in Quebec and expedited the arrival of Bill 101.

The fault line between French Canada and English Canada has impacted or complicated how both groups (but particularly French Canadians) interact with Canada and with their "Canadian" identity in the sense that it has created a hyphenated group of Canadians who can be reliably expected to break down on the issues according to their linguistic background. The great conscription crises and the animus unleashed in the two referendum campaigns nearly a generation apart attest to how people on both sides (but especially French Canadians) have elected to define themselves by the language they speak than by the country of which they are a part. Bill 101, maybe more than any other single piece of legislation, reminded all Canadians of how the fault line between English and French was predicated

upon concerns over language and, specifically, whose language would survive over time.

Examining the act itself, Bill 101 was an act that mandated a number of things that could only have heightened the mistrust and paranoia of the English-speaking minority in Quebec at the same time as it surely disenchanted new arrivals from elsewhere in the world. Notably, Bill 101 decreed that French-only public signs were to be a feature of the province; French became the language of work in public institutions; and the autonomy of English schools in Quebec was sharply reduced (Levine, 1990). And, as most students are aware, and as our course notes remind us, Bill 101 also mandated that all students receive their schooling in French. The bill was a shot across the bow of English Quebec and divided Canadians dramatically along ethnic and linguistic affiliation.

To get to the heart of the matter, for French Canadians, Bill 101 was simply a re-conquest that merely asserted that French was the dominant language of la Belle Province; for English-speaking Quebecers, however, the passage of Bill 101 was a clear repudiation of the English language as it stripped away the Charter status of the English language and also limited the rights and privileges of a linguistic group that, historically, had wielded most of the power in Quebec (Levine, 1990, p. 119). Now, and maybe forever after, the centrality of language to one's conception of his or herself and his or her place in Canada could no longer be swept under the rug - and the pretence that we were/are "all loyal Canadians first" was shattered.

In general, Bill 101 has allowed the French language to retain somewhat of its lustre amongst visible minorities arriving in Quebec: recent data compiled by the Canadian Human Rights Commission indicates that, by a 2 to 1 margin, French is the first official language of visible minorities in the province (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2007).

Source: Canadian Human Rights Commission. (2007). Strategic Initiatives: section 6 - Quebec. Retrieved August 5, 2010 from http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/proactive_initiatives/bvm_mvb/page6-en.asp

Information such as that above indicates that any hopes of complete English conquest of Quebec will have to wait for a little while longer. In fact, a closer look at the data reveals that the number of Quebecers who identify English as their Mother Tongue appears to be declining and has been for several years (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2007).

Source: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. (2007).

Ethnolinguistic composition of the population. OCOL. Retrieved August 5, 2010 from http://www.ocol-clo.gc.ca/html/ar_ra_04_05_v1_14_e.php

We can safely conclude that language laws have contributed, even if indirectly, to the exodus of English speakers out of Quebec and to the polarization of sentiments between English and French within Quebec. However, such language laws do not guarantee the future of the French language in the province given the mass influx of new Canadians who speak neither English nor French or who are disinterested in learning French. For many French Canadians, being "Canadian" may still mean being French Canadian first above all else; however, as the demographic shape of Canada <https://assignbuster.com/what-it-means-to-be-canadian/>

changes due to high immigration, they may find themselves even more isolated than ever before - but this time isolated within a huge polyglot nation where the competing languages are not just English but dozens, or even hundreds, of others.

At the end of it all, any increased tensions between French and English in Canada will tear at the Canadian national identity in the sense that it undermines the legitimacy of the confederation to have the two founding languages fighting with one another. On the other hand, even if simmering tensions will only intensify the self-identification of French Canadians with their French heritage, the reality is that all the chauvinism in the world may not matter - chiefly because French Canada and English Canada are becoming relatively smaller pieces of the Canadian mosaic as the nation welcomes in people from Asia, from Africa, from South America and from Eastern Europe who do not have either language as their first language. Ultimately, if other divides in Canada fall the French-English model and grow more acrimonious, then the country's future could be at risk; however, the French-English divide will probably become less important over time.

Conclusion

The past several pages have looked at the English-French divide in Canada, the ancient fault-line, and have argued that language laws instituted in Quebec surely did not help in bringing the two sides together; if anything, ancient animosities were revived. However, Canada is a changing nation and that means that no one can safely assume that Canada will tear apart if the gulf between English and French widens. The future is uncertain, but it is

unlikely that the French and English divide will remain the dominant one in Canadian life simply because Canada is a country that is moving beyond its French/English past.