

# Quebec and Canada A Definitive Union?

Carlos Iván Mendoza Aguirre\*



Reuters

The fleur-de-lis is the symbol of Quebec's separatists.

The end of the twentieth century brought with it the disappearance of some nations, causing the constitution of new nation-states. However, separatist tendencies latent for several decades have not been and may never be concretized. Quebec is an outstanding case in point: a Francophone enclave in North America whose independence movement dates at least from 1968, when the Parti Québécois was founded, which has won the provincial government twice. However, there are those who consider that separatist ideas emerged in 1763 when France ceded its Canadian territories to Great Britain. Since that time, the Francophones have tried to achieve special status based on their language and culture.

Other distinctive aspects of Quebec are the use of its own civil code, inspired in the French tradition, and its social institutions. One characteristic that reinforces its specificity is the adoption of Canada's constitutional reforms in 1982 without the consent of the Quebec population, bringing into question the degree of cohesion and respect for the Canadian national pact. Later, several unsuccessful attempts have been made to change the Constitution to return Quebec to the federation's norms.

The Quebec government has held two referendums in which the majority of the population has voted to continue as part of the Canadian federation, although by different percentages: 60 percent in 1980 and 50.6 percent in 1995. Clearly, the trend for sovereignty has strengthened, which is why some analysts predict that if there is a new referendum—which may happen in the not-too-distant future—the probability of a victory for separatism is more than feasible.

\* Member of the consular-diplomatic branch of Mexico's foreign service, assigned to the Mexican Consulate in Milan.

If one wanted to deny the validity of nationalist demands, it could be argued that Quebec is not repressed, since, like the rest of Canada's provinces, it has broad jurisdiction in internal matters such as education, culture, health and natural resources, in addition to the fact that it is part of a modern, democratic, progressive nation that respects human rights.

While this is irrefutable, it is no less true that a significant part of its inhabitants want to go further and constitute themselves as an independent country. They have plenty of arguments, starting with the fact that the French presence in the region preceded the English and that, even when still part of Great Britain and later for two centuries as part of a predominantly Anglophone Canada, Quebec's culture has managed to endure despite efforts at assimilation in a country that defends multiculturalism.

However, while recognizing the "sovereignist" Quebecois' right to self-determination, it should be pointed out that they cannot be the only protagonists; the feelings of non-Francophone communities in the province and even the rest of Canadians have to be taken into account.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF AN INDEPENDENT QUEBEC

##### **International Legal Consequences**

Since Canada is a party to some of the world's most important economic and political agreements, inevitably, the issue of Quebec's continued presence in these mechanisms would be of vital importance in the eventuality of a separation.

Among the most important treaties and groups that Canada belongs to are the G-7 (the most developed nations), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the British Commonwealth. Today, Quebec benefits by belonging to these groupings, but if it became an independent state, it would probably be excluded from all of them. It would have to begin the entire process to consider its admittance, although in some, such as the Commonwealth or the G-7, it might

Even when still part of  
Great Britain and later for two  
centuries as part of a  
predominantly Anglophone  
Canada, Quebec's culture  
has managed to endure  
in a country that defends  
multiculturalism.

not be admitted: the Commonwealth includes nations that not only were colonized by the United Kingdom, but are also Anglophone; and given the size of Quebec's economy, it would not have the slightest prospect of becoming part of the G-7 (as a matter of fact, the participation of the rest of Canada might even be at risk given the fact that GDP size is the criteria for membership, and Spain or South Korea, currently not G-7 members, would surpass it by a broad margin).

An independent Quebec could most probably become part of NATO given that its strategic location to the north of the United States cannot be ignored, and its being one of the developed

countries of the Northern Hemisphere would make it imperative. Also, an economy as "globalized" as Quebec's would have no difficulty becoming a member of the WTO.

##### **Internal Political Consequences**

Quebec is Canada's largest province, covering a little over 1.54 million square kilometers, making it the second largest state or province in the Americas, surpassed only by the Brazilian state of Amazonas. However, if it seceded, Canada is not the only country that runs the risk of seeing its territory decrease: Quebec could also lose a considerable part of its territory—as much as one-third—if that part decided to either continue to be part of Canada or establish one or more different nation-states. The greatest risks come from territorial claims on areas that from time immemorial have been settled by indigenous groups.

In addition to Quebec's possible internal territorial division and Canada being fragmented into two parts, collateral consequences of the division of Canada would be, first of all, the loss of the country's bilingualism. This would basically affect approximately 670,000 Francophones in New Brunswick. In addition, Ontario's predominance in the federation as the center of power in almost all spheres, particularly the economy, demographics and politics, would be accentuated. It not only has the largest industrial and capital base in the country, but it would become the center of culture and high tech industries, central aspects of Quebec's vitality. It is that vitality which today relatively limits Ontario's power because even though Quebec has fewer inhabitants and less

economic power, it is clearly the second province in these fields, followed at a great distance by British Columbia. This is why, if Quebec were no longer part of the country, that partial balance would completely disappear.

### Economic Consequences

Quebec is very important to Canada economically; it contributes about 23 percent of the gross domestic product, the second biggest of all the provinces.

If Quebec were an independent country, it would be the world's nineteenth largest economy, similar in size to Austria or Sweden, and larger than Denmark, Greece, Norway and Portugal. It should be noted that its high level of development is due to several things, among them, in addition to being the federation's largest province, covering 15.4 percent of the nation's territory, it possesses important natural resources, like minerals, water and forests. Also, it is the second most populated province in Canada (Ontario is the largest) with 7.4 million inhabitants. Despite these undoubted advantages, Quebec is relatively less developed than other provinces like Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite no plans for a new referendum, in recent years the Quebec government has carried out its international relations at an unprecedented level for a province. This can be seen in Quebec's numerous delegations abroad, the number of offices and staff of which could almost be comparable those of the foreign service of a medium-sized country.

The central Canadian government, for its part, has not been able to come up with a formula that satisfies the longed-for constitutional recognition of Quebec as a "distinct society," or at least of its "special character." This is despite the fact that it has been a constant demand for at least 40 years which has not been appropriately resolved. This is partly because of the different vision the Quebecois and the rest of the Canadian people have of the role federalism should play.

It could be said that the federation and the majority Anglo-Saxon provinces favor the conception of the Canadian "cultural mosaic" based on multiculturalism (in part as a response to Que-

**It must be recognized that the people of Quebec have had the opportunity to express themselves and the guarantee that their preference about creating a new state or continuing to be part of the Canadian federation would be taken into account.**

becois demands). This recognizes the contribution of all the cultures that make up Canada today, even if it goes against expressly defining a Canadian nationality or personality given that when you recognize all the multi-national components, the majority of which are the product of immigration, the meaning of a true local culture is neglected.

Also, the Anglo-Saxon majority sees federalism as a formula that grants equality to provincial governments, which is reinforced by the federal government's intention of centralizing even more and giving no more powers to the provinces nor accepting that they have different attributions. For them, Quebec is just one more of the country's ten provinces

and, therefore, giving it special recognition would mean abandoning inter-provincial legal equality and even cause national political instability.

However, it must be recognized that the people of Quebec have had the opportunity to express themselves and the guarantee that their preference about creating a new state or continuing to be part of the Canadian federation would be taken into account. So, if it has not separated it is because at least 51 percent of its inhabitants has preferred to remain Canadian, even though this does not mean that they renounce their condition of Quebecois and Francophones. Perhaps the underlying element of the decision is that, actually, at least half of Quebecois identify with the national project they are a part of: a developed country with an enviable quality of life, which enjoys prestige due to its initiatives for world peace and disarmament.

Nevertheless, a sovereign Quebec is perfectly viable: it possesses many natural resources, a developed industrial base and cutting edge technology in several sectors. In addition, its population has high educational levels, which would situate it internationally as a developed nation. Its traditions of democracy and respect for human rights gives it the legitimacy it would need to be recognized by other nations.

With or without formal independence, the Quebecois can be proud of having maintained themselves as a distinct people, of the values of their community, their traditions, religion and language in the face of the pressures of the Anglo-Saxon majority. In any case, Quebec has its own character, an outstanding achievement if we consider that its more than 7 million inhabitants have lived immersed in a universe of almost 300 million Anglophones. ■■■