

Un mémoire

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Déposé

À

La Commission des Institutions

Résumé

The adoption of a proportional voting system in Quebec is nothing less than the confirmation of the predominant cultural values within the province at an institutional level. Because of the demand from the regions for a significant decentralization of political power, a voting system that incorporates proportional representation on the basis of regional representation should be adopted. In redrawing the electoral map, the boundaries of the new multimember districts should coincide with the regional boundaries. Furthermore, in determining the number of representatives to be elected to the National Assembly, the government should not be bound to the present total of seats available. Finally, this commission should recommend that the government pass a law that would ensure that the next general election would be the last to use our present voting system.

From a cultural/historical perspective, there is no one set of institutional practices that works best for all cultures and for all times. This is certainly the case for voting systems, since it has already been shown that no voting system can perfectly translate the popular will as it is expressed at the ballot box into the corresponding number of elected representatives. There are always some distortions. Nevertheless, there are some institutional practices that are in harmony with the core values of an existing culture and there are those that are not. I will argue that although the first-past-the-post voting system is an institutional practice that is in keeping with the core values of Anglo-American culture but it is at odds with the core values of Quebec culture.

In making any cultural/historical analysis, there is the danger of making sweeping generalizations that are not applicable at the level of the individual or at the level of the smaller groups within a society. At the same time, there are some characteristics that do aggregate between societies that in turn are reflected in institutional practices, which will inevitably have some influence on the process of individuation. In the argument that follows, I will examine some of the pertinent cultural differences that exist between Anglo-American and Quebec culture, but it is in no way my intention to suggest that these differences hold in each and every case at the level of the individual.

In comparing Anglo-American culture within the North American context to the culture we find in Quebec, one cannot help but notice that there are fundamental differences in the way people situate themselves within each cultural matrix. In Anglo-American culture, those of British descent are profoundly effected by the Protestant reformation and by being a member of the dominant culture within the society. On one hand, there is an ideological component that emphasizes the importance of the individual, and, on the other, a social position that is relatively secure vis-à-vis the other competing cultures within the society. As a result, there is within this cultural matrix a strong tendency for the individual to be pre-occupied with his or her personal trajectory through space and time. Most often, the survival of the dominant group is not given much if any consideration. Consequently, from this widely shared mind set, there arises a set of institutional practices that favor the individual in such a way that the presence of the larger collectivity is not allowed to become an unnecessary impediment in the individual pursuit of the good life as it is defined by the individual. In short, there exists a low level of cultural insecurity and a weak attachment to the collective.

Conversely, in Quebec, the majority of francophones situate themselves in a cultural context in which the continued survival of the dominant group is not taken for granted. Importantly, rather than focusing exclusively on his or her personal trajectory, the individual within this cultural matrix is also very much aware of the movement of the collectivity through space and time. Essentially, a much stronger link is made between the prosperity of the individual and the prosperity of the collective. In short, relative to Anglo-American culture, there exists a high level of cultural insecurity and a strong attachment to the collective.

Again, it is not my intention to make the claim that all francophones are collectivists by nature, or to suggest that all anglophones are individualistic.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the two cultures that aggregate at the level of institutional practice. We need only to scratch the surface to notice them.

For example, the Canadian charter of rights and liberties has never been ratified by the Quebec National Assembly. Clearly, the belief that the individual rights of the citizens should take precedent over the collective rights of the group does not strike a sympathetic chord with the majority of francophones within the province. As well, Bill 101, which places institutional restraints on the ability of non-francophones to send their children to the public school of their choice, is regarded by the majority of francophones as a sacrosanct piece of legislation in regard to the continued survival of the French language and culture in North America. In this instance, the loss of individual liberty amongst the linguistic minorities is widely viewed as an acceptable trade-off in return for the gains that accrue to the collective: a higher sense of cultural security.

This propensity to have the gains accrue to the population at large at the expense of the liberty of the individual is also in play in Quebec's fiscal policies and social spending, especially when we make the comparison with Ontario, perhaps the most Anglo-American province within the confederation. For instance, tax rates are much higher in Quebec than in Ontario, which, of course, leaves residents of Ontario with higher levels of disposable income. However, residents of Quebec enjoy social advantages that are noticeably absent in Ontario: namely, universal daycare at 5\$ a day and highly affordable post-secondary education. Indeed, Quebec has the lowest tuition fees in North America.

This same propensity also leads the Quebec government to take into consideration the multiple views within the society before making political decisions. In brief, because of the higher level of cultural insecurity, there are large social incentives to employ a consensual decision making process where the particulars of the collective agreements, although important, are secondary to the solidarity achieved through the negotiating process. In Quebec, high levels of social fragmentation are seen as a threat to the continued existence of the collective. Given time, it is widely believed that the continued fragmentation of the society could unravel the collective fabric that holds Quebec society together: the tacit agreement to live together within a French milieu.

From an Anglo-American perspective, this propensity to favor the collective at the expense of the individual is seen from an entirely different light. Within a cultural matrix characterized by low levels of cultural insecurity and weak attachment to the group, people inevitably turn their attention to the advancement of personal interest: in economic terms, the rational maximization of self-interest. Indeed, Anglo-American culture celebrates those at the top of the various status hierarchies, be it in the arts, sports, politics, or in the business sector. Given the pervasive pressure to climb the ladder of success, the claims made upon the individual by the collective are often regarded as an unnecessary hindrance to the advancement of the individual, especially when we take into consideration the importance of conspicuous consumption within the culture. Thus, for those whose major concern is their social position in society relative to

others, there are great incentives to band together in order to prevent the masses from demanding too much. In short, a fragmented society enables what Michel Lind refers to as the over class to perpetuate its domination vis-à-vis the maintenance of a majoritarian/authoritarian system of governance.

From a cultural/historical perspective, the electoral system has always been one of the means that a small well-healed minority can suppress the demands of the majority for a more equitable redistribution of a society's resources. In the Canadian context, it was not so long ago that only male landowners had the right to vote. As the society evolved, however, the franchise was extended to what now can be described as universal suffrage. Correspondingly, as the right to vote became more inclusive, fiscal and social policies became more progressive: the distributive gains finding their way into a greater number of pockets.

Despite the advances made in the area of voting rights, two vestiges of Canada's colonial past remain in place that promote a majoritarian/authoritarian system of governance. The first is the lack of adequate laws governing the financing of political parties. The second is the first-past-the-post voting system, which systematically distorts the popular will in order to false majorities that in turn allow for 100% of the political power to be transferred to a political party that almost without exception garnered less than 50% of the popular vote.

To some the continued existence of such an electoral system may seem at odds with the democratic institutions we might come to expect from an advanced industrial society in the 21st century. However, from a cultural/historical perspective this electoral system is in keeping with the cultural values of the dominant group in Canadian society. Whether or not these values are shared by a majority of Canadians is another question, one that is, in fact, a subject of public debate. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned institutional practices encourage the individual accumulation of private capital with only a minimal interference that a membership to a collective can entail. Conversely, given the cultural differences to be found in Quebec, we should expect a marked difference in institutional practice.

Indeed, this is the case within Quebec's electoral system. With the exception of Manitoba, which just recently amended its electoral laws, Quebec was the only province in Canada that did not allow financial contributions from corporations, unions, and civic groups to its political parties. This practice is in keeping with the cultural value placed on the continued existence of the collective. Essentially, by allowing only donations from individuals combined with spending limits on electoral campaigns, Quebec has adopted significant institutional practices that encourage that the distributional gains are widely dispersed throughout the society at the expense of the individual's capacity to amass wealth. In other words, in Quebec there are institutional practices in the electoral laws that promote a more equitable distribution of the economic pie. In the rest of Canada, however, there is great resistance to adopting any change to the electoral laws that would diminish the disproportionately large slices of the economic pie that some individuals and groups enjoy.

Turning our analysis to the subject of the voting system, I would argue that from a cultural/historical perspective, the voting system in Canada, which has a certain cultural logic within the Anglo-American tradition, is without question at odds with the predominant cultural values that exist today in Quebec.

For instance, one of the most salient differences in the way politics is practiced in Quebec is the preference for a more consensual approach instead of the adversarial combativeness typically found in majoritarian systems. Repeatedly, the Quebec government brings together the relevant stakeholders together during public forums in order to find acceptable approaches to common problems. Conversely, in majoritarian systems, the solutions to common problems are most often imposed upon the majority by the minority that exercises monopolistic control of political power. The advantage of the consensual approach is that the benefits accrue to the collective, whereas in the adversarial approach, the benefits accrue to a much smaller group, the minority that wields political power.

Certainly, this preference to opt for the more consensual approach was in play in the manner in which Quebec eliminated its budgetary deficit as compared with how it was done in Ontario. In Quebec, in order to attain the famous "deficit zero", the then premier of Quebec, Lucien Bouchard, convened the representatives of the public service unions, which represent some 400,000 workers, and gained their support before reducing the budget. This was certainly not the case in Ontario, where the then premier of Ontario, Mike Harris, bolstered by a false majority in the Ontario legislature, went about making the budget cuts with little heed for the concerns of those who worked in the public sector.

In summary, the adoption of a proportional voting system in Quebec is nothing less than the confirmation of the predominant cultural values within the province at an institutional level. Given that a proportional voting system rarely transfers political power from the population to a single political party, it, in fact, promotes a consensual approach to political decision-making. Importantly, political power ceases to be an all or nothing proposition. As a result, political parties are less inclined to engage in zero-sum battles with their political adversaries.

The net winner in making such an institutional change is the population at large. Once monopolistic control of political power is broken, political parties are able to stop the widespread practice of trying to distort the position of their rivals while, at the same time, trying to be as vague as possible about the details of their own policies. Clearly, this is a situation that does not lead to an informed public. Moreover, once the population gains greater knowledge of the political options available, the political parties are more apt to make wise trade-offs in forming coalitions and these coalitions in turn are more apt to extend the time-horizon of political action beyond the next general election. Finally, governments elected on the basis of proportionality are more apt to try to expand the economic pie and to ensure an equitable distribution.

In regard to which form of proportional voting system would work best for Quebec, I believe that the electoral representation commission furnished the Quebec government with two very interesting alternatives: modified regional

proportional representation and territorial proportional representation. However given the recent change to the political landscape, the demand from the regions for a significant decentralization of political power, proportional representation on the basis of regional representation is the model that I would recommend.

Personally, I do not believe in the so-called sacred link between a deputy and his or her constituents. As has been widely noted, most people are incapable of even naming their MNA, and only a small percentage have ever made an attempt to contact their elected representative. Indeed, by maintaining single member districts what we in fact do is maintain the traditional practice of allowing money to have an undue influence in determining who becomes the deputy and, in turn, who become the principle recipients of patronage. In my mind, the so-called sacred link is nothing more than a patronage pipeline that allows for preferential treatment to flow towards those who contributed financially to elect the deputy.

In general, multi-member districts in which the representatives are selected on a proportional basis would better serve citizens of each region. That way, there is less of a chance that any one faction within a region receives a disproportional amount of the dividends that come from backing the right party, and that any one region is penalized for not supporting those parties that form the governing coalition.

Secondly, in determining the number of representatives for the National Assembly from each region and the subsequent total thereof, the government should not be bound by the current number, 125. What is more important is that the popular will is represented faithfully. This means that each multi-member district should have enough seats (at least ten) so that the smaller parties have a real chance of electing a representative. Moreover, a bank of seats, whose number would vary from one election to another, should be set aside. If a political party were able to gain a sufficient percentage of the popular vote above the national threshold but unable to gain a proportional representation in the regional ridings, these seats would be used to correct for the distortion.

Thirdly, in the political context that exists today in Quebec, we should expect that in the near future there will be, in fact, some sort of decentralization of political power to the regions. Therefore, it would be politically prudent to redraw the electoral map so that the future electoral boundaries coincide with the regional districts of Quebec. In the case that these newly formed political regions have elected assemblies, these assemblies should also have their representatives elected on a proportional basis.

Finally, given the fact we are at the end of an electoral mandate and there is not sufficient time to implement a new voting system before the next general election, I strongly urge that this commission report back to the National Assembly that the government pass a law that, at the very least, adopts the principle of proportional representation. This law would be legally binding so that, regardless of the results of the upcoming general election, it would be the last in which the first-past-the-post voting system was used to elect the members to the National Assembly.