Quebec and Canada

One Country, Two Cultures

Canada and the United States share a common border, language, and colonial history. However, one major difference between the countries is language: Canada is bilingual, meaning it has two official languages. Although most Canadians speak English, a sizeable number of Canadians living in the province of Quebec primarily speak French. The French Canadians who live in Quebec are generally known as "le Québécois." Over the past 300 years, French Canadians have played an important role in Canadian history. At the same time, they have also preserved their distinct culture.

The difference in language and culture between Quebec and the rest of Canada has created political problems that remain a sensitive issue. French speakers from Quebec feel their minority status makes their requests less important to the national government. Some have even gone so far as to suggest separating from Canada. In response, the Canadian government has tried to make laws protecting the status of the French language.

History of New France

Present-day Canada was comprised of both French and British colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this time, a large number of Canadians were French. Though "New France," as the French colonies were known, had only a few inhabitants, it was a key economic resource for France. Wars between France and Great Britain saw this territory pass between the two powers over time. One particularly bitter contest was the Seven Years War (1756–1763).

After the Seven Years War, France was forced to give up all its North American territory, and Great Britain gained its Canadian land. While some French colonists
decided to leave, others remained in New France, around the cities of Montreal and Quebec City. Despite being in a territory controlled by their former rival, many of these French colonists were able to get along with their new British rulers.

Recall how the U.S. colonies rebelled to become free from Great Britain in 1776. Though some expected the Canadian colonies to join the revolt, Canadians remained loyal to Britain. For many years, this relationship between mother country and colony remained. Rather than lose Canada to revolution as they did the U.S., the British changed some of their policies. Colonial governors began to pay more attention to the desires of French Canadians. Britain decided to unify Canada and gave the resulting government more local control.

In 1867, Canada gained some independence from the dominion of Great Britain. For more than 100 years after this decision, Quebec was a willing member of Canada. The province had a strong economy and was able to keep its traditions intact. Eventually, the overall success of the young nation caused many to regard themselves as Canadians rather than as English or French.

**A Revival of Le Québécois**

By the mid-20th century, Canada stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Outside of Quebec, the country had far more English-speaking citizens. By then, some in the minority French-speaking area of Quebec felt the national government no longer understood or respected their needs.

This feeling only became worse with the wars of the early twentieth century. In both World War I and World War II, Canada had to draft soldiers to fight for Great Britain. Though many English-speaking Canadians were willing to support the cause, the same was not true in Quebec. French Canadians were mostly opposed to fighting on behalf of Great Britain because French Canadians thought of Great Britain as a different nation with a different set of priorities and goals.

This feeling became more obvious in the 1960s, when French Canadians began to desire real political change. In what was called the “Quiet Revolution,” voters replaced many old, familiar politicians with young, energetic ones. These new politicians often pushed for more rights for Quebec and even independence from Canada. Many of these young politicians took a hard line approach to dealing with the national government. They claimed that national politicians did not care about Quebec and that the province’s best interests were different from those of Canada.
In response, the national government endorsed many changes and created departments of bilingualism, as well as other reforms. The Canadian government wanted to address the fears of those in Quebec in order to keep from losing the province. However, the struggle over sovereignty and the future of the country was about to go from the halls of the Canadian Parliament to the streets of Quebec. The next few years would put the issue of Canadian unity to the test.

The October Crisis
The politician who guided Canada through these troubled times was the young, energetic French Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. He took office in a divided Canada, but thanks to his reforms, some of the tensions between Quebec and the rest of Canada were diminished. Under Trudeau, all Canadians became equal under the law.

Early in his career, Trudeau helped pass the Official Languages Act of 1969, which made French and English legally equal. All government properties were required to use display both French and English. These types of reforms were still not enough for many voters in Quebec. Some still pushed for independence. As a French Canadian, Trudeau took this fight in his home province personally.

In 1970, an incident known as the “October Crisis” threatened to plunge Quebec into violence. Although many groups peacefully campaigned for Quebec's rights, a militant group known as the Liberation Front of Quebec (FLQ) used more violent tactics. The FLQ kidnapped two high-ranking Canadian officials, including a friend of Prime Minister Trudeau. The FLQ had used terrorist tactics before, but this crisis was far more public and violent than in the past. The FLQ hoped to inspire those in Quebec to rise up and join the group in open revolt against the national government.

Prime Minister Trudeau was forced to declare martial law in Quebec, but his actions did not stop the militants from murdering one of their captives. For several days, the situation was tense. Canadian Army units occupied Quebec and began searching house to house. Many thought this search might spark an uprising in Quebec. Those in Quebec, however, were disturbed by the political violence. Widespread disgust among French Canadians spelled the end of the FLQ. The crisis eventually died down, the guilty were arrested, and the power of radical Québécois groups was broken.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms
Concerned by the situation in Quebec, Trudeau and the government of Canada were faced with two choices: they could either change Canadian law to further protect the rights of minority cultures or risk alienating Quebec entirely. Trudeau and many of his supporters felt the best way to unify Canada was through a bill of rights that would act as a supreme governing document for all Canadians. At the time, Canada still abided by the laws of Great Britain and did not have its own bill of rights. As such, the individual provinces were free to make most of their own laws. Many provinces, including Quebec, objected to losing their authority to an overriding federal law, even though it was supposed to help French Canadians.
Rather than use violence, the Parti Québécois, or “Party of Quebec,” was created to pursue the political goals of French Canada peacefully. One of its first actions was to make French the official language of Quebec. In the mid-1970s, they helped draft and approve two laws known as Bill 22 and Bill 101. These laws made French the undisputed legal language of Quebec. Suddenly, many of the English speakers of Canada felt unwelcome in the province. Many English-speaking businesses then chose to leave the area and relocate to other parts of Canada.

Together, these laws prohibited English from being displayed on public signs and, with a few exceptions, from being taught in schools. French was also made the official language in government offices, courts, and other public institutions. Almost immediately, people came forward to voice their opposition to Bills 22 and 101, including many English-speaking Quebecers. In addition, several foreign leaders, the Supreme Court of Canada, and even the United Nations spoke out against the injustice of the laws. Quebec's language laws seemed to be tearing the country apart.

To restore harmony, a series of compromises were added to the laws. For example, English could be on public signs, but it would have to be smaller than French. Likewise, English could be taught in some schools. Many of these add-ons did not satisfy all the opponents of Bills 22 and 101. Some English speakers were angry because they felt as if another language was being forced on them.

Then, in 1980, a referendum was called in Quebec on the question of independence from Canada. After a hard-fought campaign, Quebeckers turned out in large numbers to vote for or against separation. To the surprise of many, 60 percent voted against independence. It was a big victory for those politicians trying to keep the country united.

The “Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” was passed shortly afterward. This list of basic rights was granted to all Canadian citizens. It guaranteed them many of the basic freedoms they had already enjoyed, but it also legalized the rights of French speakers and other minorities to preserve their culture and language.

Much of Canada welcomed this move. The British government, whose approval was also needed, quickly passed the charter. Yet Quebec's leaders were consulted very little before it was created. Among some French Canadians the move was regarded as a betrayal, despite the rights it gave them. As a result, Quebec never signed the charter.

**Sources**


