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Conrad Black: Bill 96 marks the beginning of the end of Canada

Quebec must not be allowed to spit in the face of the majority of its fellow citizens and oppress its English-language minority, while cheerfully pocketing almost \$13 billion annually from English Canada

Conrad Black

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PHOTO BY RYAN REMIORZ/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Almost the entire Canadian political community is now sleepwalking into a crisis of federalism. Quebec's Bill 96, in which all five of Canada's federal political parties have acquiesced without an audible peep of concern, unilaterally amends Canada's Constitution and removes English as an official language that anyone has an established right to use in all offices and workplaces of the federal government and federally chartered corporations and institutions in Quebec. The entire basis of the constitutional reforms of 1981, including the patriation of the amending mechanism and the proclamation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is a consecration of Canada's status as an officially bicultural country. English is the principal language of more than 75 per cent of Canadians and approximately 18 per cent who prefer to speak English rather than French in Quebec, Canada's second most populous province. Bill 96 also furthers the steady diminution of English as a language of instruction in Quebec's public schools. This is an outright cultural oppression of the English-speaking population of Quebec and of bilingual Quebecers, and an outrageous affront to the more than 90 per cent of Canadians outside Quebec whose principal official language is English.

The system of equalization payments drawn from the most prosperous provinces and paid to those with per capita incomes below the national average was devised in the mid-1950s as a method of asserting the constitutional importance of the federal government after Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis had forced the federal government of Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent to recognize the co-equal right of Quebec (and other provinces) to assess income taxes. All provinces have since asserted that right. Although Quebec has been prudently fiscally managed and is only marginally less prosperous per capita now than the average of other provinces, it still receives straight cash transfers from other provinces of \$1,562 in 2020 for every one of Quebec's over 8.5 million citizens. Much of this comes from Alberta, which has been put at a disadvantage because of the present federal government's war on that province and on the oil and gas industries. The equalization payment formula also enables Quebec's state-owned hydroelectric authority to discount the cost of electricity to Quebecers, effectively at the expense of the equalization payment-contributing provinces.

The dissolution of large countries into their constituent parts has become relatively commonplace in recent decades. The disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was not entirely the failure of communism: the secession of 14 constituent republics apart from Russia was more exactly a rejection of Russian dominance of the many ethnicities over which Russia, under the Romanovs as under the Communists, asserted itself. In the same time, Czechoslovakia broke into its two constituent parts, Yugoslavia was sundered into seven independent countries (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia). Part of Indonesia seceded, and there appears to be a majority in support of the secession of Catalonia from Spain, even though the Spanish central government has prevented such an initiative, though with some difficulty and not necessarily durably. With the elevation to office in Northern Ireland of Sinn Féin and the disagreements between the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the European Union over trade arrangements and the border between Ulster and the Republic of Ireland, the secession of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom and its adherence to the Republic of Ireland is once again a possibility. There will presumably eventually

be a two-state remedy to the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, the irredentist struggles of the Armenians and Azerbaijanis and the disaffection of the Turkish Kurds rumble on, but the national governments that have been undermined are scarcely comparable to the political institutions of Canada.

Canada has the great distinction of having devised its own political institutions, unlike most decolonized countries, and the result is that it has, since 1867, been the only transcontinental, bicultural, parliamentary confederation in the history of the world; it is a system of government of grandeur and imagination and it is one that has withstood the test of time as one of the world's oldest continually operating democracies, alongside the United Kingdom and United States. And in that time, the U.K. lost the large province of 26 of the 32 Irish counties now in the Republic of Ireland, and just two years prior to Canada's Confederation, the U.S. was reunified following what President Abraham Lincoln chose to describe as an insurrection, which required four years of a terrible civil war in which an estimated 750,000 people in a population of 31 million were killed and large parts of five separate states were smashed to rubble and scorched to ashes.

In the life of Canada's Confederation, France has had a Bonapartist empire, a brief civil war, three republics, a dictatorship that was a satellite of Nazi Germany and a government in exile, an outright Nazi occupation and two provisional governments. Germany has had a proliferation of smaller states, an autocratic monarchy, a tentative and disarmed republic, a totalitarian Nazi dictatorship, a four-power military occupation, a division into two antagonistic countries, one of them a Soviet-dominated communist dictatorship, and the federal republic of the last 30 years. Japan has progressed from a feudal hermit kingdom to an autocratic and belligerently aggressive monarchy, military government and occupation by the United States, and the prosperous constitutional monarchy of the last 70 years. The upheavals and transformations of China, India, Italy, Russia, Spain and most of the eastern European, Arab and Latin American countries are notorious. A challenge to Canadian federalism thus has plenty of precedents.

The federal government should seek the support of all three anti-separatist opposition parties in suspending any transfer payments to any province that does not recognize the full and equal rights of both founding cultures, and should unambiguously declare that both official languages will continue to be used in all federal government workplaces and federally chartered corporations and institutions throughout Canada. Within its long-agreed constitutional jurisdiction, the writ of the federal government must run everywhere in the country. What is afoot in Quebec now is the beginning of the end of our 155-year-old Confederation and everyone in Canada should be aware of that. Quebec must not be allowed to spit in the face of the majority of its fellow citizens and oppress its English-language minority, while cheerfully pocketing almost \$13 billion annually as an ex gratia gift from English Canada. We have a country, with Quebec or without it.

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