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HARPER AND THE N-WORD

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Abstract (summary)

Flanagan discusses the politics related to Stephen Harper's resolution in the House of Commons that the Quebecois form a nation within a united Canada. He clarifies that Harper's recent motion has nothing to do with deux nations, because the motion emphasizes people rather than government, and that the Quebecois are not described as a nation tout court but a nation inside Canada. However, he fears that using the nation-word to describe the Quebecois opens a Pandora's box of future problems, inasmuch as separatists may use it later on as a platform for demanding more powers and more money, that could lead to the sovereignty of Quebec and the breakup of Canada.

Full Text

Headnote

How a Meech opponent could decide to declare the Québécois a nation

It was the sort of unexpected move that Canadians are learning to expect from Stephen Harper. Without any prior warning or public discussion, he announced he would move a resolution in the House of Commons that "the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada."

Although the announcement seemed sudden, Harper must have been thinking about this for months. He had gotten beaten up in the Quebec media and in his own Quebec caucus for refusing to use the N-word last June during Quebec's Fête nationale. Then, after the Iggy Nation recklessly pushed the Liberals into debating the Quebec Nation, Gilles Duceppe upped the ante by bringing the issue to the House of Commons. Harper saw a chance to solve his own internal problems while heading off a debate that could be damaging to the country.

Everyone agrees that Harper's motion declaring that "the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada" was clever strategy. At one stroke, he got the NDP and most of the Liberals to back him, discomfited Gilles Duceppe and the Bloc Québécois, and laid the basis for the next Conservative campaign in the province of Quebec. Indeed, it became a tactical triumph after the BQ capitulated to popular pressure in Quebec and decided to endorse Harper's motion. Gilles Duceppe looked indecisive, opportunistic, and-worst of all for a political leader-weak when he had to support a motion including the words "united Canada."

But wasn't it odd for Harper to be calling the Québécois a nation, even with qualifications? Those with long memories will recall that Harper urged Preston Manning to oppose the Meech Lake accord; forced Manning to campaign hard against the Charlottetown accord; introduced a private member's bill in 1996 (C-341) to nullify any unilateral declaration of independence by Quebec; and condemned the now-forgotten 1997 Calgary declaration, which was an attempt by the premiers to restart constitutional negotiations with Quebec.

One of Harper's main themes in opposing appeasement of separatism was criticism of the "Two Nations" (deux nations) theory that had been adopted by both the Progressive Conservatives and the New Democrats in the 1960s. Deux nations was always bad history. Canada was not formed in 1867 by an entente between leaders of pre-existing English and French nations. Confederation resulted from British approval of the agreement of several colonies in British North America to form the Dominion of Canada. Recognizing the obvious characteristics of language and religion that made French Canadians different, the Fathers of Confederation afforded them generous treatment, including a province-Quebec-where they would be a majority and could exercise political power.

Deux nations was not just bad history, it was toxic politics, leading to polarized negotiations between Quebec and the "Rest of Canada." Yet the "Rest of Canada" could not effectively negotiate because it consisted of nine provinces without a corresponding identity. Czechs could negotiate with Slovaks in the partition of Czechoslovakia because they were pre-existing national entities, but there was no national entity corresponding to the "Rest of Canada."

Harper's recent motion has nothing to do with deux nations. Look carefully at the wording: "That this House recognize that the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada." It does not say that Quebec is a nation, which would have implications of statehood, because Quebec is a territory with a government. It says that the Québécois are a nation, emphasizing people rather than government. And it is also significant that Harper used the French word "Québécois" even in the English text of the motion. This emphasizes that we are talking about a group of people with some common linguistic and cultural characteristics, not about a government. The Québécois, moreover, are not described as a nation tout court, but as "a nation within a united Canada," emphasizing that the concept of being Québécois has meaning only as part of Canadian history.

Of course, you can only push logical analysis of word magic so far. As James Travers rightly said in the Toronto Star, this solution demands the suspension of disbelief: "Quebecers must convince themselves that being a distinct nation within a united Canada is meaningful, while the rest of us must conclude it's not."

Harper also criticized earlier attempts at appeasing separatism for being dangerously open-ended. Premier Robert Bourassa notoriously said that Meech Lake was just the first stage. The Reform party's critique of the Charlottetown accord, which Harper and I helped write, condemned it as an "agenda for future negotiations." No one could possibly know what that document meant, so laden was it with items remaining to be settled. And in the background to the Calgary declaration, Quebec Liberal leader Daniel Johnson was calling for "a new legal framework for Quebec."

In contrast, Harper's current motion is not attached to any specific demands from Quebec. It is not part of an agenda for future negotiations. Of course, Quebec Premier Jean Charest, like all provincial premiers, would like the federal government to do certain things, and he will continue politicking in that direction. But he is not playing blackmail games, threatening to separate from Canada unless his demands are met.

Harper was always opposed to phrases such as "distinct society" and "special status" because they would put Quebec in a class by itself with powers enjoyed by no other province. He restated his view of the federal system in the speech "Federalism and All Canadians," which he delivered in 2002 while running for the leadership of the Canadian Alliance. "I would prefer a vision of federalism that is pan-Canadian-federalism not just for French Quebecers, but federalism for all Canadians," he wrote. He specifically rejected the need for

special status for Quebec to protect its language and culture.

Many, however, says using the N-word to describe the Québécois opens a Pandora's box of future problems. Even if you only mean it as semantic recognition today, separatists will use it tomorrow as a platform for demanding more powers, more money, leading to the sovereignty of Quebec and the breakup of Canada. Other groups may also want to be recognized as nations. Indeed, Aboriginal leaders are making precisely that demand, and British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell is resurrecting the idea of "three founding nations" in Canada-English, French and Aboriginal. And how will visible minorities react? The resignation of Michael Chong from Harper's cabinet is not an encouraging sign.

Knowing Stephen Harper as I do, I have no doubt in his ornery ability to resist unwanted pressures. But who knows where a less strong-willed prime minister might take us? Can you say "son of a Meech"?

The old coalitions of the Meech and Charlottetown era are reappearing, as if by magic. All federal parties support Harper's N-word resolution, just as they supported the Charlottetown accord. Almost all federalist spokesmen and commentators in Quebec hail it as an act of great statesmanship. Aboriginals want to be included. Keepers of the Trudeau legacy such as Andrew Coyne, Michael Bliss, Paul Wells and Warren Kinsella are appalled, while voters in the West wonder what is going on.

Maybe this episode will be like 1995, when the House of Commons passed a resolution calling upon Parliament to view Quebec as a "distinct society" when passing future legislation. The resolution served a political purpose for the Liberal government of the day, which needed to show that it was doing something after almost losing the referendum on sovereignty; but it never had any practical effect, and hardly anyone today even remembers that it was passed. Pandora's box has been opened a crack; can it be slammed shut again?

Sidebar

SON OF A MEECH: After Harper, another round? Meech supporters in 1990 (above).

Sidebar

I BAD HISTORY. TOXIC POLITICS. QUEBEC'S STATUS IS A PANDORA'S BOX.

'I HAVE NO DOUBT of his ornery ability to resist unwanted pressures,' the author says

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