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Barbara Kay: Quebec sovereignty movement is ‘Occupying’ a nursing home

Author of the article:

Barbara Kay

Publishing date:

Nov 09, 2011 • Last Updated 8 years ago • 3 minute read



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Decades ago, when dinosaurs such as arch-separatist Jacques Parizeau made Quebec sidewalks tremble with every pulverizing footstep, the Occupy movement would have been exploited by sovereigntists to stir up agitation for independence amongst young people. But when Montreal had its own little downtown Occupons moment this fall, the protesters simply mimicked what was going on elsewhere. To ironic effect.

One of the young people's placards read, "Capitalism is organized crime," and "The whole system has got to go." But organized crime is more linked to unions in Quebec than to the stock exchange, and our "system" isn't capitalism, it's socialism. In fact Quebec youth already have exactly what the Occupy movement seems to be

capitalism, it's socialism. In fact Quebec youth already have exactly what the Occupy movement seems to be demanding: cradle-to-grave — no, make that womb to grave (Quebec now pays for IVF treatment) — security; virtually free daycare; the cheapest university tuitions in North America; a parental insurance plan guaranteeing generous maternity and paternity leave; and a redistributive system in which 40% of Quebec's population pay no taxes, while our most "ruthless" capitalists pay more taxes than anywhere else in North America.

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Quebec is the quintessential nanny state. Add to all these entitlements a French language in rude health, with economic parity between francos and anglos, and you have a perfect recipe for political complacency.

Which helps to explain why the Bloc Québécois ran out of steam in the last election, and why the appetite for sovereignty amongst young people is tanking. In 1979, support for sovereignty amongst 18-24 year olds stood at 63%, against an average of 34% in older groups. A recent Leger Marketing poll has only 32% of the youth cohort favouring sovereignty, and similarly lacklustre numbers amongst older groups.

These numbers must come as a crushing blow to the old troubadours in the sovereigntist dream palace. They counted on throwing youth the sovereigntist torch from their failing hands. Former PQ Premier Bernard Landry used to say it was mathematically inevitable: "My generation is sovereignist, my children are sovereignist and my grandchildren as well." If they're not just humouring him, the Landry offspring aren't typical. Each generation in a fast-changing globalizing world like ours has its particular issues, and nobody can predict that his political vision will remain his grandchildren's 50 years on.

To ensure that their grandchildren stayed sovereigntists, a smart old guard would have kept the old grievances alive. They would have allowed the French language to remain fragile by letting new immigrants choose the English stream of education. They wouldn't have created a Bloc Québécois, so they could complain Quebec had no representation in Ottawa. They would have encouraged more unilingual mandarins in the federal civil service so they could justify Quebecers' alienation from federal institutions. They wouldn't have demanded, and got, observer status at the UN (with no voting power) or separate status at the Francophonie or all their flashy "delegations-générales" abroad — London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, Brussels, Munich, Mexico — that give the appearance of a quasi-independent state to the world, while highlighting Ottawa's reasonableness and flexibility. And maybe they should have taken a leaf from certain other would-be nations' book, and done nothing to improve their economic lot, so they could say it was the lack of a state that kept them poor and bitter. while their neighbours prospered.

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Instead, look at what those foolish sovereigntists did. They used the time waiting for Godot to prove that Quebec could retain its unique character, yet wax culturally strong, while exercising far more influence in Ottawa through its dedicated nationalist federal politicians than any independent Quebec could. Today, in spite of a total lack of political vision amongst all its present party leaders, both in power and in waiting, in spite of soaring public debt, high taxes, unsustainable social programs, pervasive corruption and ongoing wars with the government over wealth transfers, Quebec is weathering the latest recession with aplomb, and even lowering its unemployment rate, while increasing wages.

Who knows how long these Occupants' political complacency will last? A “demographic winter” is setting in that will impact Quebec more than the other provinces, because its population is aging faster. But even there, the government is showing responsibility; its most recent budgets contain measures to suppress its swelling deficits. True, it means higher taxes, but we're used to that.

In short, Quebec matured in spite of itself, and proved that the often-mocked joke about what Quebecers want — “an independent Quebec within a united Canada” — was feasible de facto if not de jure. Result: Quebec sovereignty is “Occupying” a nursing home near you.

National Post

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