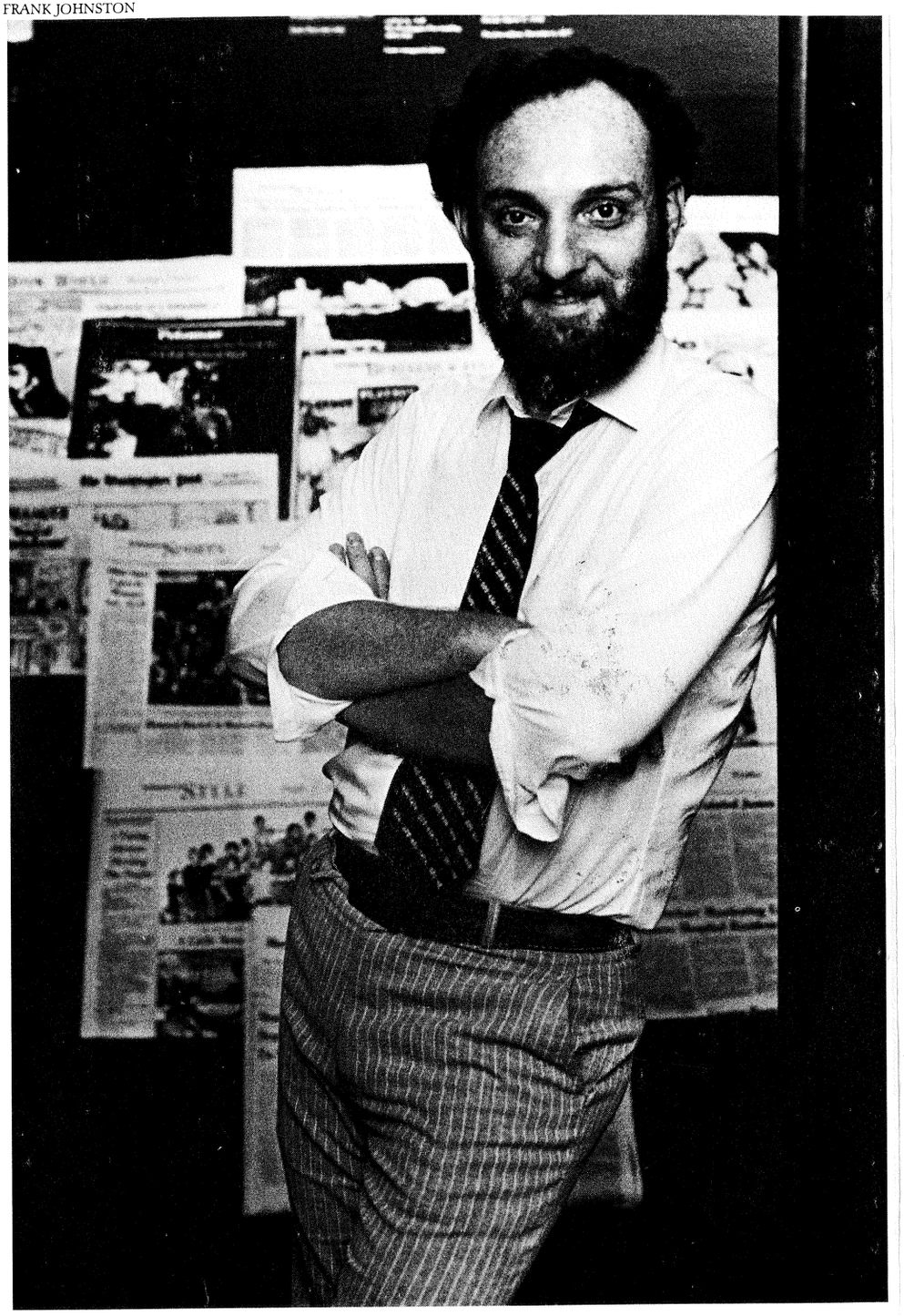
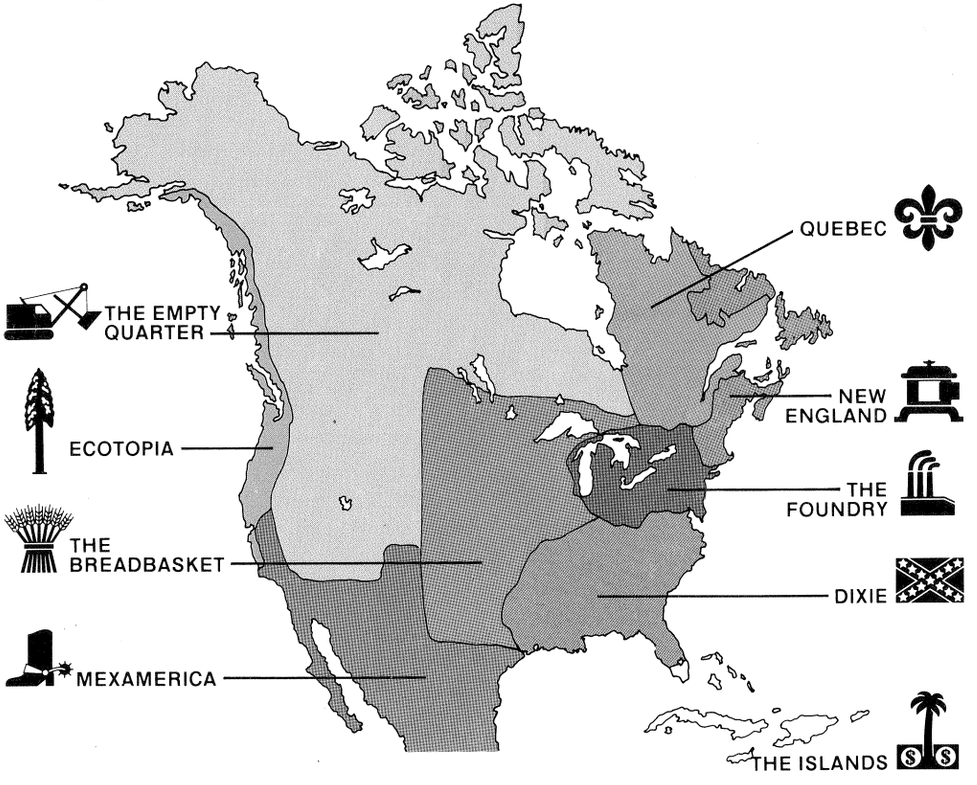
FRANK JOHNSTON



Forget the traditional map—new realities of power and people are making this continent into

The NINE NATIONS of NORTH AMERICA



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QUÉBEC

SIX HUNDRED MILES north of Montréal, the land is so wild and forbidding that even the moose won't put up with it. Around La Grande Rivière, where the snow begins to blow in mid-September, but stops soon after Christmas, when it becomes too cold even for that, the caribou begin their range.

The fishing is terrific in this crumpled, glacier-scoured plain. The land is so tattered with lakes and ponds that, despite the thousands of years the Indians and Eskimos — Cree and Innuit — have lived off it, there are untold numbers of waters where trout and pike have never been disturbed by man.

Before they are covered by winter, exquisitely fragile and microscopically detailed mosses hug the pink, marblelike granite and quartz. They are, in places, plush doormats, dark green and velvetlike. Nearby are cool patches of pale lichens, a green on the edge of ice-blue. Accented by the crimson of dying vines, they beckon you to a crouch, the better to study and marvel at their world, so impossibly tiny compared with the black spruce that tower sixty feet over them, taller than some office complexes, unclimbable, remote.

Across La Grande Rivière there are more majestic black spruce, in sparse stands. It's important to focus on the idea that those far trees are every bit as big as the ones that dwarf both you and the moss, because the sight of what has been done to this stretch of the northern bank of La Grande numbs the mind and blows out any sense of scale.

The trees on the far bank, despite their size, are mere afterthoughts of the landscape, which is thoroughly dominated by an improbable, incongruous, canyonlike staircase that has been blasted into the rock.

Try to imagine two football fields of solid granite, laid side by side, with a great deal of space to spare in the end zones. Imagine that on the right sideline, where the bleachers should be, there is a sheer rock wall the height of a three-story building, running the length of the field and more.

On the left sideline of the left-hand football field, there is a sheer drop-off as deep as the right-hand wall is high. Beyond the end zones, in either direction, are two more sheer granite walls. Each of these is three times as high as the sideline wall.

What you've got is a plain two hundred feet wide and four hundred feet long. The thirty-five-foot-high right sideline wall and the thirty-five-foot-deep left sideline drop-off exist because this plain is part of a terrace.

This terrace consists of eighteen of these plateaus, stepping smartly down from the top of the valley of La Grande Rivière to its shore — a distance of over half a mile, a sight that would be impressive enough, even if these giant's stairs were not sunk one hundred feet straight down into the rock of the slope. This hundred-foot drop is what yields the towering walls at the end zones of our metaphorical football fields.

Standing, looking at this broad, deep, manmade canyon in the wilderness, two and a half hours by prop-jet from civilization, you try to reach for some perspective. Craning your head back, you take another look at the tallest branches of your friend the spruce tree. You think of what it would take to fell this giant, cut it up into cordwood, and then haul it away, truckload after truckload. It's a job that's within human comprehension, and the comprehension is that the job would be hard. Hell, just getting the truck this far north would be hard. Then you look back to the canyon, which is to the tree as the tree is to the tiny lichen, and try to imagine what it took to carve those right angles and straight lines into the granite, and you can't do it. How do you move that much earth when on the *average* day of the year it's 7 degrees below freezing? How did they get the rock out of there? How much dynamite did that take? What kind of fundamental craziness did it require even to think of doing such a thing?

I relate all this by way of introducing Québec, the most improbable, and yet most undeniable nation of the nine. Québec, a small

collection of six million people, relatively few of whom speak English, surrounded by hundreds of millions of Americans and Canadians who do, built this canyon.

Yet the canyon, by the standards of Québec, is something of a yawn. It's a straightforward piece of work. All it is, is a safety device. It's a spillway to dump unwanted water out of the reservoir of a hydroelectric complex called LG 2. It's nothing compared to the dam that holds back the river. That's almost two miles long, and taller than the United Nations building is high. The tiny speck you see crawling along the top of it is a 110-ton, $400,000 Caterpillar 660 belly-dumping earth mover, the tires of which cost $7000 apiece and are taller than a man. The reservoir behind it covers more than a thousand square miles, which would drown the entire state of Rhode Island. To fill the reservoir, three rivers — the Eastmain, the Opinaca, and La Petite Opinaca, which used to quietly flow west into La Baie James — have been diverted by more dams so that they now flow north, into La Grande Rivière. If not another drop of water were added to it, it would still take Los Angeles more than forty years to drink the resultant lake dry.

If rock-moving awes you, consider the caverns and tunnels four hundred feet underground that house and serve the turbines. If ordinary dump trucks had been used to haul the rubble from the excavations, and one had been loaded every ten minutes, twenty-four hours per day, every day without letup, it would have taken over six years to clear these caves.

The main "machine room," where the dynamos are located, is something out of science fiction. It's reminiscent of the vast underground hangar in the movie *Star Wars*, from which the rebels launch their fighters in the final attack against the Empire. The most significant difference is that the real thing at LG 2 is a great deal larger than the imaginary cavern in the film. It's much longer than either the 110-story Sears Tower in Chicago or the World Trade Center in New York is tall.

It's fifteen stories high, and more than half that wide. A grid of man-sized high-intensity lamps glare down from the entire length and width of the roof, casting a strange, shadowless light. Metal screeches against metal as men hanging inside control cubes confidently and at high speed jockey machines that offer no obvious explanation of their function.

When all the generators housed in this room are spinning, they produce more energy than six nuclear reactors of the Three Mile Island type.

And this is just LG 2, which began to produce power in late 1979. There are also an LG 3 and LG 4 to come in phase one of La Baie James–La Grande Rivière project over the next few years. (LG 1 will come later.) And that's just phase one. Also on the drawing boards for this hydroelectric basin, which is the size of England, are installations at the unpoetically designated LA 1, LA 2, and EM 1 sites. And that's not all. La Grande Rivière de la Baleine — the Great River of the Whale — even farther north than La Grande Rivière, is scheduled to be tamed.

And this is just the new construction. Even without it, Hydro Québec, the Tennessee Valley Authority–sized outfit that is behind all this power, produced so much surplus electricity in the summer that it has a contract to help light and air-condition New York City.

And this is all done totally by the fiercely and proudly French province of Québec.

Québec's existence is utterly improbable. It's so unlikely that a French civilization should exist in North America hundreds of years after Louis XIV and Napoleon had written off the continent, that the Québécois have worked it into their nuclear-holocaust jokes. What races will survive World War III? The Chinese and the Québécois. The Chinese because there are so many of them, and the Québécois because if they've survived the last four hundred years, they'll survive anything. Québec is that part of North America that is so distinct from the rest, and against such odds, that it takes pride in serving to define what a nation is — and can be.

Québec, the largest province in Canada, is three times the size of France — even larger than Texas. Its population is larger than that of Ireland or Denmark. The cornerstone of its civilization is that, despite being surrounded by English-speakers, over 80 percent of the population speak French as their mother tongue, and the overwhelming majority speak no English at all. Québec is becoming relatively diversified, economically, with raw and semi-transformed materials, like pulp and paper, iron ore, lumber products, aluminum, asbestos, and copper, going to the States; manufactured goods and food products, ranging from textiles to yogurt, being traded within Canada; and high-technology know-how, the most prominent being hydroelectric and transportation expertise, getting exported to other continents. Québec is strategically located, controlling both sides of one of North America's greatest trading rivers, the St. Lawrence, which is the major way out of the Great Lakes to the sea.

By the standards of North America, the population is amazingly homogeneous. Most people can easily trace their roots back three hundred years or more to the arrival of their first ancestor in Québec. It's a place with a long-standing and well-founded sense of oppression at the hands both of the Anglophones (the local word for English-speakers) and the Catholic Church.

But most important, it's a place where the people feel like a nation.

In food, music, fashions, values, education, ways of thinking, politics, and other important ways, Québecois have become, or are becoming, in their famous slogan, *"maitres chez nous"* — masters in our own house.

Nationhood is such an obvious reality in the minds of the Québécois that most of the talk about the subject is by English-speakers explaining it to each other, not by Québécois themselves.

In Québec, for example, a discussion of whether the province will make it on its own economically, when it gains some sort of a divorce from Canada, is not considered a discussion about nationalism. It's regarded as a practical discussion about what one should do about this pre-existing nationalistic "French Fact." The point of this distinction is that it is logically possible to demonstrate that Québec could do badly, in economic terms, as a nation. But it would be dead wrong thus to draw the conclusion that nationalism does not, or should not, exist. For, ultimately, nationalism is a human, not an economic, reality.

Conversely, Québécois would point out, all the arguments in the world which lead to the conclusion that Canada makes sense economically cannot logically convince you that the diverse collection of entities called Canada is a nation.

It's clear as consommé to the Québécois how they are different from English Canada, not to mention the United States and, for that matter, France; and the rest of this chapter will examine these differences. What's less clear to them and, for that matter, some Americans, is in what sense English Canada is so different from the United States in the deepest, gut terms in which they describe nationalism. Some Québécois have come to refer to English Canada's collective identity as "mapism," not "nationalism." The idea is that, compared to Québec, the only thing Canadians hold in common are the same maps, with the same arbitrary surveyors' lines drawn on them. "Canada," the government of Québec has observed archly, "is obliged to use a certain ingenuity to define itself as a distinctive culture."

Thus, discussions of French-English separation in Canada start

off on a fundamentally wacky basis. The minority says of the majority, as one Québec poet said, "Canada does not exist — just does not exist — other than on paper, and it *has* never existed and it *will* never exist."

When English Canada is forced by this argument into the incongruous position of attempting to explain what a poor Prince Edward Island fisherman has in common with an Alberta rancher who has oil interests, it starts skating dangerously close to the admission that they, for example, both watch reruns of "M*A*S*H," and both admire full-sized Chevrolets.

This strange situation did not arise overnight. In fact, it started almost four hundred years ago. When Champlain founded Québec in 1608, the Québec problem was born.

Today, in the Place Royale, the meticulously restored lower city of ancient mansions, pubs, docks, and warehouses at the foot of the cliffs of old Québec, there is a museum that houses a wall-sized map, entitled, in French, "Québec, Capital of an Empire."

Housed in an intimate, dramatically lit grotto reminiscent of a chapel, the map outlines a French-explored North America that is, in fact, quite awesome. From Québec it traces the western slope of the Alleghenies all the way to the Gulf Coast and then sweeps the continent to the west beyond the Rockies. It shows all the major river basins — the Ohio, the Illinois, the Mississippi, the Missouri.

It includes Toronto (originally Fort Rouillé, 1749); Pittsburgh (Fort Du Quesne, 1754); Uniontown, Pennsylvania (Fort Necessité, 1734); Detroit (Fort Ponchartrain du Détroit, 1701); Vicksburg, Mississippi (François); Natchez, Mississippi (Fort Rosalié, 1716); Montgomery, Alabama (Toulouse, 1714); Mobile (de la Mobile, 1701); New Orleans (Nouvelle Orléans, 1718); and Point Comfort, Texas (St.-Louis, 1695).

Also, Sault Sainte Marie, Green Bay (St.-Francois Xavier), Atchison, Kansas (Cavagnol); Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin (St.-Nicolas, 1690); Winnipeg (Fort Rouge, 1738); Dorothy, Alberta (La Jonquière, 1752); Memphis (Assomption, 1739), and, of course, St. Louis, Missouri.

Near the map, in a historical note pointedly not accompanied by an English translation, but carefully phrased at a level that an Anglo with a few years of high school French can struggle through, it's observed that for 150 years after Champlain established the French presence in America, explorers and merchants fanned out across the continent from Québec.

At its height, the note continues, the French Empire in "Ame-

rique" covered almost all the continent with the exception of Florida and Mexico, which were occupied by the Spanish. As for the English, they hugged only the Atlantic coast south of the Gaspé Peninsula.

Unfortunately, France's interest in North America was shortsighted at best. Throughout the monarchies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France wanted maximum exploitation of the New World with minimum development. In the seventeenth-century France of Louis XIV, the object of government in Europe was the consolidation of central authority and the reduction of the autonomy of satellite powers. The last thing that was wanted was encouragement of a Québec that could stand on its own, if critical ties to the homeland were severed. In the eighteenth century, France was characterized by regimes that could be referred to, in their relations with the New World, only as corrupt, rapacious, stupid, and a few decades away from being on the wrong end of a guillotine.

Thus, by the mid-1700s, there were nearly fifty thousand French-speakers in the land that would become Québec, but the society in which they had organized themselves was oddly constructed so as to be better at surviving the challenges to come than it was at resisting them.

The French settlers, or *habitants*, made some major adjustments to the institutions and patterns of thought of the Old World in their first 150 years.

For one thing, the traditional French political tripod of manor lord, priest, and peasant was severely damaged, and with it the link to secular authority. In a harsh environment like Québec's, the *seigneur* — the fellow who had received the land grant from the Crown and who in turn subdivided it among the habitants — was a poor imitation of the protective nobility of feudal France. He was hardly in a position to ensure the settlers protection from the startling new range of adversities of the St. Lawrence wilderness. So, in the face of ugly winters and unhappy Iroquois, the habitants organized themselves cooperatively, rather than hierarchically, even altering the centuries-old pattern of laying out farms so that it would be easier for one neighbor to help another rather than rely on the civil authorities.

Under such an arrangement, there wasn't a great deal of need for a bureaucracy. Social and agricultural affairs were taken care of informally, within the limits of the settlement made up of equals, and without a great deal of attention paid to the peasant ways of Europe.

In fact, as the habitants deveioped this new culture, they began to see themselves as different from the other French-speakers — the adventurers and urban imperial administrators, military men, and merchants who were still European, still not committed to North America.

Thus, two societies developed in New France, one metropolitan, educated, literate, and dependent for markets, wages, and ideas on the ties to the old country. The other, the ancestors of the bulk of today's Québécois, was self-sufficient and, except for the maddening habit of thinking, acting, and speaking in French, utterly North American. While the habitants, for example, might not have had a clue as to how to behave amid French sophisticates, they certainly had some ideas about how to behave around, say, a North American bear, a development not unusual in pioneer societies.

As the habitants thus assigned less importance to life in a secular municipality, the ever-present parish priest moved into the power vacuum.

The priest was literate, which meant he was needed whenever a legal document like a will or a bill of sale was required. He was the guardian of recorded history — the records of births, marriages, and deaths. (In fact, he was so good at maintaining the public records that, to this day, Québec's genealogical records are among the finest in the world.) The demands made on him as a spiritual overseer were brisk, because the French settlers were notorious for letting the good times roll, a cultural trait nurtured to this day.

But the key element in this march toward the future was that the priest's first allegiance was not to France. Ultramontanism was a very hot issue at this time. It held, essentially, that there should be one Church, independent of who was in power in what country. The Jesuits, specifically, of New France were great believers in this theory, so maintaining the culture of the empire was in no way as important to them as was reporting directly to the home office in Rome.

This was the kind of rickety social structure which was smashed by the British when they conquered the French colony by force of arms.

The taking of the city of Québec in 1759, when the British general Wolfe overcame the defender, Montcalm, on the Plains of Abraham, resulted, in 1760, in the ending of a series of border wars between the two European powers. The Conquest also settled, for exactly two centuries, the fate of the Québécois: an over-

whelmingly French society was to be ruled by the English.

The lack of resistance on the part of the habitants to this arrangement after the Conquest was based on the burdensome treatment they had received at the hands of the old French ruling class, coupled with the amazingly tolerant, for its era, attitude of the British.

On the one hand, to the habitants who were well into their second and third generation as North Americans by now, France was becoming increasingly irrelevant. The old country had never really embraced New France except as a get-rich-quick scheme. In fact, the habitants had come to associate the transient French with scandals, extortions, and internal bickerings associated with the lining of their own pockets even at the expense of advancing the cause of the empire.

One of the major reasons the habitants gave of their lives and resources in the fight with their French cousins against the British before the Conquest was a misguided self-interest. They believed that with the French in power, all they had to deal with was the burden of corruption. With the British in power, they firmly believed, their language, religion, and way of life would be destroyed.

But the British, after the fighting, offered a canny deal that, for all practical purposes, started to freeze the development of Québec society right where it was. All sides ended up accepting it with gratitude. The habitants got to keep what they wanted — their rural French North American society. The French elite was saved from instant ruin, although in short order they found themselves in decline, as some merchants and administrators left for greener pastures and others were crippled by the disruption of their lines of credit and sources of goods on the continent. The British got the peace and quiet that they would have loved to obtain from their thirteen Atlantic colonies to the south. And the big winner under the new English Protestant regime, ironically, was the Roman Catholic Church, which became the executor of this deal, and thus, in effect, the real wielder of secular power over the vast majority of the inhabitants of Québec.

"The political authority of a Protestant society," writes Alfred Dubuc, "thus became the defender of the values and institutions of the Catholic Church, while the religious authorities of French-Canadian society upheld, in the eyes of their flocks, British institutions."

The influential *independentist* sociologist-historian Marcel

Rioux, in drawing political observations from these developments, says, "After the Conquest, Québec society, far from continuing to develop like other Western societies of the era, becoming industrial, urbanized, and secular, on the contrary draws inward upon its popular and rural elements and, instead of becoming more urbanized, becomes more folklike. We observe, among other phenomena, a greater predominance of agricultural occupations; a greater scattering of the population among the rural parishes; more social homogeneity; reinforcement of moral and religious norms; less important internal stratification and differentiation; and finally, a more restricted territorial, occupational, and upward mobility."

And that's a polite way of saying it. What you had, until the "Quiet Revolution" began in 1960, was a society that, in hindsight, was amazingly backward and ingrown by North American standards.

In fact, many Québécois now date the dark ages of their society not from the Conquest of 1760, but from the 1830s, when the democratic liberal secular elite from within the Québécois society began to try to wrest power away from the Church and the English. This resulted in armed revolution by 1837, but the *Patriotes*, as they were called, were defeated by the same old coalition: French Catholic denunciation from the pulpit, and professional English military tacticians on the ground. It was after the crushing of the Patriotes that the Québécois, while still far and away the majority in Québec, began to think of themselves less as one of the races destined to rule North America than as a minority. In order to convince themselves that their survival was worthwhile, they immersed themselves in their ancient traditions, and thus was launched 150 years of petrifying conservatism.

It's tough to draw a parallel between the Québécois experience of the last two centuries and anything in the rest of North American history, although it has been tried.

Pierre Vallières, a leader of the now-defunct radical, terrorist FLQ — Front de Libération du Québec — wrote a book, while in prison in the late 1960s, called *White Niggers of America*. "To be a 'nigger' in America is to be not a man but someone's slave," it reads. "For the rich white man of Yankee America, the nigger is a sub-man. Even the poor whites consider the nigger their inferior. They say: 'to work as hard as a nigger,' 'to smell like a nigger,' 'as dangerous as a nigger,' 'as ignorant as a nigger.' "

He then goes on to expound a liberation struggle that equates

the French-Canadian population with "niggers, exploited men, second-class citizens."

There surely are vivid comparisons to be drawn between American blacks and French Canadians. Every Québécois has his share of stories. The most pointed, perhaps, are the ones about Anglo bosses demanding that their underlings "speak white." Separatist Parti Québécois founder, René Lévesque, once referred to his English opponents as his "white Rhodesians." There are those who have been spat on or beaten up for speaking French in their own land. There are the jobs denied and school doors closed even to English-speakers with a French accent. There's the chic Québécoise refused service in a restaurant or boutique in the heart of her home town of Montréal for not speaking English. The workers in Anglo-owned asbestos mines brutally suppressed by thugs paid for by their own government. The "two solitudes" of English and French lived side by side for generations, never communicating with each other. Alarmingly, there was also the built-in sense of inferiority that might cause a grandmother to refuse to buy a stove built in Québec because if it was built by her own kind, "it can't be any good."

But that comparison doesn't completely satisfy. To get a sense of the Québécois, you have to throw in a little American Indian, for example.

By North American standards, the Québécois have been here since the dawn of time. Not only were they entrenched well before the Pilgrims landed (as were, for that matter, the Spanish in Sante Fe), but the whole society, from the Conquest to the present, is remarkable in the relationship it has to the land.

I found myself in a high-rent economic think tank in Montréal in 1979, in casual conversation with a quick, bright, bilingual Québécoise. She happened to ask how a plodding Anglophone like myself had come by such a French name, and, showing off the genealogical research I had done, I told her my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather had helped found the town of Boucherville, across the river and slightly downstream from Montréal. In fact, I said, puffing out my feathers, I was about certain that I'd found the house he'd built in 1670, which was still standing.

"Oh!" she said in all seriousness. "You mean you've been denied your patrimony?"

Patrimony is such an odd word in North American English that it wasn't until hours later that it dawned on me that she was

expressing sincere sympathy for my having to put up with strangers living in my eighth-generation ancestor's house.

The point is that, though many things have changed for the Québécois in this century, the acres of Québec, its rivers and mountains and towns, are still integral to their nationalism. Even to those natives who shrug at the cold, rocky soil and deplore the ancient agrarian ways, it simply makes no sense to talk about a collective identity that does not reflexively relate to this land, their land.

In the early 1960s, when the Quiet Revolution was beginning in Québec, a poet and songwriter named Gilles Vigneault came out with "Mon Pays" ("My Country"). It blew minds the way Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'" electrified Anglo young people at about the same time. And it was about nationhood and the land. "My country," he sang, "is winter." It's like reading the words of original Native Americans from the last century talking about the buffalo and the Plains and themselves as inseparable concepts. One is not, without the other.

By the same token, Québec has had its own trail of broken promises.

Anglos were not the only people with an American Dream. Québec had one, too, and it also was one of being an American people, with culture, values, and language spreading from sea to shining sea. This didn't end with the Conquest of Québec, for the French continued to push on like the English and Americans to conquer the continent. In fact, at the time of Confederation, in 1867, when English-speaking Ontario and French-speaking Québec united in an uneasy union called Canada, and then convinced two eastern colonies to join them as provinces, not only were there abundant French-speaking Acadians in the Atlantic provinces, but there were major settlements of intermarried Indian Québécois, called Métis, in the prairies. In 1869, when the land they considered their own was bought by Canada from the Hudson's Bay Company, these French-speaking Métis, led by Louis Riel, rebelled against the territorial government and demanded provincial status with protection for land rights and the French language. It was granted, and Manitoba became a province in 1870. When their land rights were threatened again in Saskatchewan, they rebelled again, but this time they were crushed by Canadian troops, and Louis Riel was put to death.

The execution, which took on the proportions of a martyrdom, marks the clinching embattlement of the French people. For them

it soon became clear that their future horizons would not be broad if the rest of Canada had anything to say about it. Although the British North America Act, which set up Confederation, stated that existing Catholic (that is, French) and Protestant (that is, English) school systems were to be maintained, in 1871 New Brunswick, the heart of Acadia, dropped sectarian public schools in blatant violation of that core treaty, on which the ink was hardly dry. No one stopped it.

In 1890, Manitoba, the land of the Métis, did the same thing, and, though the federal government at first tried to keep the dual schools, it soon capitulated to the provincial government. In 1905, when Alberta and Saskatchewan were created, the federal government tried to set up the mandated dual school systems, but caved in to local English opposition. In 1912, Ontario limited to the first two grades the use of French as the language of instruction; in 1914 it closed some publicly supported French-language schools, and the federal government made no attempt to stop it.

The list goes on. In both World War I and II, the Québécois had no reason whatsoever to be interested in fighting and dying for England. Thus, they voted on each occasion to allow Canada to join the fray on the condition that there would be no draft — that such sacrifices as had to be made should be made by those who wished to volunteer for it. That promise, too, was soon broken.

Thus did a once-continental people find themselves backed into a reservationlike situation, despite every promise.

But even leavening the black analogy with that of the American Indian doesn't completely relate Québec to the rest of the continent's experience. Québécois have a lot in common with Hispanics. For one thing, obviously, they speak a language that isn't English. For another, they share a religion that was despised for generations by Anglo Protestants.

In fact, Arthur R. M. Lower, writing about Québec in 1900, said, "In Québec, the first loyalty was to the race and to the church. If a choice had to be made between the two . . . the race would be put first. French Canadians were so peculiarly a band of blood brothers, they had come through so much since the Conquest, were so conscious of the hostility of the English, that there is nothing surprising in this devotion to the 'race.' It was devotion stimulated by every possible device in order to assure the French what has already seemed to them the one thing needful, *'la Survivance.'* " This passage would hardly sound strange to Mexican-Americans. They sometimes refer to themselves as "La Raza," the

Race. In Texas, the Hispanic political party is called La Raza Unida.

But beyond that, Québec's history has important parallels to Hispanic homelands.

The national inferiority complex of both Mexico and Québec, for example, was strongly shaped by military defeats inflicted by Anglos. Mexico's trauma was losing California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas during the 1840s. Québec's was its Conquest.

Both Cuba and Québec saw their economies ripped off by Anglos. In the case of Cuba, it was exploitation of its rich agriculture. For the Québécois, it was the sale of its minerals and timber at a fraction of their true worth.

Both Puerto Rico and Québec are involved in strained confederations with Anglo governments. Both have outspoken independence movements.

But perhaps most important, the proposed solutions to Québec's problems have similarities with these countries. Without even going into the question of revolution, which Québécois seem to consider unthinkable, there are parallels.

For example, as John D. Harbron, an Anglo Latin American scholar has pointed out, Parti Québécois economic pronouncements owe a debt to Mexico: "Québec [were it to achieve separation] would not be the first North American republic to establish state capitalism based on a strong nationalist ideology. Mexico has developed such an economy since the 1930s, with control of foreign ownership and state intervention in such key industries as energy, transportation and communications."

There are indeed close similarities between Pemex, the Mexican national oil corporation, and Hydro Québec. They both control vast energy resources. They are both mainstays of their respective economies. They were both created by the wresting of power from Anglos via nationalization. And the creators of each were told that such backward people as Mexicans or Québécois couldn't possibly handle such sophisticated institutions.

One of the foremost "radicals" pushing the creation of Hydro Québec in the early sixties later said, "I remember this middle-level executive [at one of the companies about to be nationalized] saying, 'Do you people really think you can run this company as well as we can?' He was so filled with contempt. Of course he was English-speaking and the company was English-owned, as they all were. I remember thinking, 'You bloody so-and-so. You're just

like the British were a few years ago, saying the Egyptians could never run the Suez Canal.' It was the same paternalistic contempt — the colonial master speaking to the backward native. 'We'll show you, you bastard,' I thought."

And they did. The name of the man telling the above story of when he was a young government minister is René Lévesque, who, in 1976, took over the very government of Québec with his Parti Québécois. His reminiscences appeared in a very long article, carried by an anxious *New York Times*, that explained to English-speaking North America where he was taking Québec.

Hydro Québec, like Pemex, is a source of great national pride not only to politicians, but to ordinary citizens. If Mexicans now take great satisfaction in sticking the high cost of their petroleum in the ear of Anglo North America, and even greater pleasure in the fact that their oil is being pumped by their people, in their language, the parallel for Québec would be Manic 5.

Manic 5 was the name of a hydroelectric project on the Manicouagan River built in the late 1960s. Although dwarfed by later achievements at La Baie James, when it was being built, Manic 5 became part of the Québec national myth. Songs were sung about it; legends told. Men went off to work on it as if on a crusade.

As the novelty of proving that Québécois are capable of performing great feats wears off, working for Hydro Québec has come to be considered merely a good job. Hardly a heroic one.

Nonetheless, Hydro Québec still holds the capacity to startle the well-meaning person who knows the twenty-first century when he sees it, but who always rather thought it would speak English. For example, in La Baie James, if you don't know that *boyaux d'incendie* are fire hoses, and a blaze breaks out, you're one crisped Anglo, because that's the only way the emergency equipment is marked.

There is one last minority with which Québécois have a great deal in common, and that is the Dixie white. While it may seem incongruous that a people like the Québécois could have something in common with blacks, Indians, Hispanics, and the heirs to the Confederacy, it's nonetheless true. A lot of the problems of the Québécois, like those of unreconstructed Mississippians, were their own goddamn fault.

Not only did Québec, before the 1960s, like Dixie, spend a lot of time being ingrown, insular, backward, backward-looking, and religion-ridden, but both blamed their condition on their conquerors while lovingly nurturing their plight through local institutions folk subscribed to almost unquestioningly. Furthermore,

modern Québécois, like modern Southerners, realize this, and admit it when there are no Yankees around.

At the turn of the twentieth century, many Québécois rejoiced that their land was less than industrialized, thus less materialistic and more spiritual. The boast was a thanks to God that, rather than being the stokers of a foundry, the French were the guardians of the flame of Faith. In the twenties and thirties, according to sociologists, bishops would write to the few French-Canadian factory owners, asking them to pay low salaries to their employees. The hope was that the workers would return to the land, the heavily romanticized rural life, over which the Church — the keeper of the culture — had maximum control.

In 1936, one curé, one pastor sermonized: "You won't believe me. I went to Montréal. And around midnight there were some people walking on the sidewalk! What on earth were they doing there? Thank God you [the faithful] were asleep. You are going to heaven because you lead a normal life. You breathe fresh air. You go to bed. But Montréal! Those people will all go to hell!"

This kind of stuff now makes Québécois wince in exactly the way a Georgian does on hearing old hymns to the "southern way of life."

It's amazing how fast things have changed since the Quiet Revolution, Québec's own "Prague Spring." A people that once identified themselves as rural, Catholic, obedient, long-suffering losers have awakened to the fact that they are urban, industrialized, capable, in power in their own land — and in serious danger of having to take responsibility for their own future.

The awakening was presaged by the death of Québec's premier Maurice Duplessis in the fall of 1959. A Huey Long–like despot with a penchant for handing over Québec's national resources to Americans and English Canadians for a tiny fraction of what they were bringing in neighboring provinces, Duplessis ruled with a feudal iron hand, the last embodiment of the theory that a subdued Québec was the best of all possible worlds and the ultimate flowering of French culture. This despite the fact that even within their own land Québécois made less money per capita than just about any other ethnic group save the poor despised Indians.

In June 1960, after a brief interregnum, a liberal, Jean Lesage, was elected premier, and the water broke. "The Quiet Revolution," says Rioux, "was more a mental liberation, a development of critical attitudes towards men and affairs than it was revolutionary action per se. It was, above all, a re-evaluation of ourselves, a reappearance of a spirit of independence and of enquiry

which had been smothered in the snows of a hundred year winter. Québécois grew confident that they could change many things if they really wanted to. They began to shrug off the fatalism of a conquered minority who had come to think that they were born to lose."

The first thing that happened was the take-over by the Québec provincial government of the French public schools, hitherto controlled by the Church. With that was born the attempt to shift a system geared to educating students for, at best, the nineteenth century, into one that was, in fact, going to produce kids who would take power in the twenty-first.

In 1962, under the slogan "masters in our own house," came the nationalization of the electric companies and the creation of Hydro Québec. René Lévesque, the young Liberal cabinet minister who fought so strenuously for provincial control of this, the bedrock of the economy, thus created in Hydro Québec a consumer for the French technicians, managers, and engineers who, it was hoped, the new school system would soon produce.

In 1967, the year of the hundredth anniversary of the Confederation of Canada, Charles de Gaulle, in the heart of the French province of Québec, cried *"Vive le Québec libre!"*— Long live free Québec! — thus not only straining relations between Canada and France for years to come, but, frankly, confusing the hell out of most Québécois, who hadn't quite gotten that far in their thinking yet.

In 1968, as pressure for a solution to "the Québec problem" mounted, dashing, formidable Pierre Trudeau was elected prime minister of Canada, with a mandate to keep Québec in the federation. The same year, Lévesque founded the Parti Québécois. Gathering together the shards of previous independence movements that had had narrow appeal, and more of a political-education function than anything else, Lévesque forged the Parti as a clear-cut attempt to gain power and then independence.

In 1970, the social upheaval in Québec reached a crisis. Extremists, who didn't believe change was occurring in as rapid and sweeping a fashion as desirable, had punctuated their thoughts with terrorist bombings. But in October 1970, the FLQ kidnaped a diplomat and a provincial cabinet minister. The federal government declared martial law in Québec, and the Canadian Army occupied the province. Civil liberties were suspended. Hundreds of arrests and searches were conducted without warrant. The next day the cabinet minister was found dead in the trunk of the car in which he had been abducted.

Canada is a peaceful country, and these events were more shocking even than Kent State in the United States. To this day, both sides are so traumatized that, no matter what happens in the Québec drama, there seems to be an unspoken agreement that further violence, either in the cause of revolution or its suppression, is unthinkable.

The violence did establish, however, that something uncrushable was astir in Québec. Separation was clearly going to be on the agenda. In 1976, the Parti Québécois surprised everyone, including itself, by sweeping into power in the provincial election. (Lévesque himself didn't think he'd win until 1977.) Its platform was that Québec was a nation, had always been a nation, would take into its own hands its national affairs, and anybody who said it couldn't be done could go to hell.

And, in fact, now even the Québécois are sometimes awed by the change they've made take place.

Less than a decade ago, Québec's language, for example, was scorned by Anglos who dismissed it as a patois that did not deserve to be called French, much less learned.

But since French has been legislated as the sole official language of business and government in Québec, you can find a University of Québec economist scanning the front page of *La Presse* and saying, "Here. Look at this. This is the revolution."

Indeed, the story he pointed to was amazing. It reported that the number of English-speaking parents attempting to enroll their children in total-immersion French public schools was ten times what the school system was prepared for.

As Michel Roy, a prominent Montréal editor, noted:

> I know a lot of people who are learning French like mad. It's fantastic to see that. They want to integrate into this society. One reason is economic. But another reason is that they feel unhappy when they are rejected if they do not speak French. And more than ever today in any public place one is asked would you parles francais, please.
>
> Yet another reason is that the French society in Canada in this turmoil of the last twenty years is something interesting. I know many young lawyers and doctors in the English community who just like to talk to the young French-speaking people, to go to the French theater, to read books and get involved. It's just fun. Even in Toronto, people find it interesting and will try to read French, just to see what's going on.

Another measure of how far things have come is how rapidly the Church has lost power. Since its authority as an elite was inextricably intertwined with the old secular order, it crumbled un-

der the assault on other values. Not only did it lose communicants in droves, but it lost nuns and priests at a rate so extraordinary that Québécois now feel a little sheepish at how long the Church was considered a bastion of their nationalism. The change suggests strongly that the Church's foundations had been rotting for a long time, and the only reason it stood so long was for lack of attack. The Québécois know well the wisdom of the line from the Pogo comic strip: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The speed with which the Church lost influence in Québec is still as much of a puzzle as the speed with which Islam gained power in Iran. As one anthropologist observed:

> Religion became another cultural trait. It was never discussed. There was no opposition. It was the thing to do. It was a given.
>
> When spring comes, the habitant discards his mittens. The Quiet Revolution came, and religion became a thing of the past.
>
> In my village, nobody had ever met a Protestant. You didn't have to fight for your religion. When a cultural trait becomes so ingrained, so naturalized, it no longer means what it was supposed to: revolutionizing your life. It was a custom. Something you had to do.

The anthropologist could take a great Gallic delight in recounting in ribald detail the manner in which, even in the forties and fifties, and even in the small rural parishes, Church teachings on such matters as eating fish on Friday, abortion, fornication, moderation in the use of alcohol, and respect for the parish priest were routinely ignored.

> You have to remember [he said], what Mass was. Sunday was a holiday, and you put your good clothes on, and you go to see your neighbors, and you arrive as late as you can. In one village [near Québec City], there were these big processions and the priest said everybody had to be there. Everybody took his place in the procession, so I took a place in the procession, and there were two files. The priest was walking down the rows, and, when he was at the far end, the people near me were laughing and telling dirty stories. It was terrible. The priest came near us, and he was telling the beads, and everybody bowed his head, and when he was gone, they'd go back to telling their dirty stories.

One of the more interesting results of Québécois becoming more secular is that an important characteristic of their old national identity has disappeared: their high birthrate.

Besides its geographical identity, one of the reasons that Québec is a nation, rather than merely a cultural subgroup, like Boston Irish or San Francisco Chinese, is that there are so many of them relative to the population of the rest of Canada.

Québec, with over six million people, has 27 percent of Canada's population, which is twice as big a share as either blacks or Hispanics have of the total U.S. population.

Not only is the group sizable, but for generations it was dramatically reinforced by the introduction of tiny new members of the society. "During the last two centuries," demographer Jacques Henripin notes, "world population has multiplied by three, European population by four, and French-Canadian population by eighty, in spite of net emigration which can be estimated roughly at eight hundred thousand."

In the thirties, the population was growing so fast that the French language was gaining ground in Canada, and it was generally expected that New Brunswick would soon become the second province to have a French-speaking majority. At the time of the 1941 census, persons claiming French as their mother tongue made up only 26 percent of the adult population of Canada, but over 36 percent of all children younger than four years. Had these conditions continued, French would have become the major language in Canada.

But today, that amazing cultural condition, tied to rural and religious values, in which to be Québécois often was synonymous with being from a family of six, ten, twelve children or more, is disappearing. The birthrate now has plummeted to zero population growth levels. There is serious political significance to that because, as one pundit put it, Québécois used to have to wait until the census results came to know if their nation continued to exist. If there were no French population growth to match the inevitable losses to emigration and cultural assimilation, Québec could disappear in the fashion of Louisiana Frenchness.

As a result, Québec has an intense interest in running its own policy on the considerable number of immigrants it receives. Already, the language laws force the children of the Italians, Poles, Vietnamese, Africans, and so many others who move to the province, to be educated in French, not English. This is meant to ensure that the proportion of French-speakers in the province does not decline.

The continued attractiveness of Québec for immigrants, despite the fact that, all things being equal, they would prefer to learn English, the language usually associated with opportunity in North America, speaks to the question of economics.

In the sixties [says the head of the biggest bank in Québec, stepping out of his chauffeured blue Mercedes diesel], people who were emotionally committed to federalism, for all kinds of good reasons, launched the argument that it was totally and absolutely impossible for an economy the size of Québec's to survive independently.

That line of argument is wrong. If you say that a country the size of Québec, with a population the size of Québec, is much too small by world standards, then it doesn't take much to extrapolate and find that Canada doesn't make much sense, either.

It's obvious that there is no economic argument that can demonstrate that you *have* to be federated, or you *have* to be sovereignty-associated, or whatever. What economics can tell you is what the costs are.

The "whatever" the banker referred to, of course, is independence. But the "sovereignty-association" is the Parti Québécois' proposal to create a new relationship with Canada in which Québec would share with that nation a common currency and a dedication to a lack of internal travel restrictions, but in everything else, Québec would be a different color on the geopolitical map. It would have complete control over a long list of its own affairs, ranging from taxation to diplomacy to military affairs.

The *Péquistes,* as Parti Québécois adherents are known, favor sovereignty-association because they realize that, though the Québécois desire for an end to inferiority is strong, it is less than suicidal. The polls repeatedly show that, while the people support a new political arrangement, they've gotten used to eating regularly and watching their color television, and they're not in favor of losing what they've got.

In May 1980, in fact, a referendum asking the Québécois whether they wanted to go their own way was soundly defeated.

The question, surely, was unique in North American politics: "The government of Québec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, *based on the equality of nations.* (Emphasis added.)

"This agreement would enable Québec to acquire exclusive power to make its own laws, levy its taxes, and establish relations abroad — and at the same time maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency."

The *nons* beat the *ouis,* 60 percent to 40 percent. The Québec Anglo vote was 87 percent against. But even among French-speakers, it lost. An immense women's *non* vote turned the tide.

But interestingly enough, by losing this battle, the Parti Québécois may end up winning the war.

Predicting the future of Québec's relationships with the rest of the continent is an idiot's game, which I won't indulge in. But I will report one scenario that achieves a certain level of plausibility.

The following is history:

Part of the reason the vote on sovereignty-association went so overwhelmingly *non* is that Prime Minister Trudeau, himself a Québécois, eloquently promised the people of Québec, in French, that if they turned down the PQ proposal, he would personally guarantee that the Canadian constitution would be overhauled. In this overhaul, he promised, many of Québec's concerns would be affirmatively dealt with in the context of a "renewed federalism."

True to his word, in September 1980, he called a constitutional convention, at which he and the provincial premiers attempted to become the fathers of a new, stronger Canadian federation.

It was a complete bust. Trudeau wanted to create a Canada in which even more power was centralized in Ottawa. All the other provinces in this, the most loosely confederated Western democracy, beginning to see the wisdom of Québec's arguments, pushed for more autonomy to settle their own affairs internally. Québec's Lévesque, interestingly, played the role of sober statesman at the convention. He got high marks later for bargaining in good faith. It was the *other* Canadian provinces that could not arrive at any kind of agreement. Without making too much of this, their disagreements broke out along the lines predicted by the Nine Nations theory.

Here is where the scenario starts:

Trudeau, an ardent federalist, so this thinking goes, will push to write his own centralist constitution, and then go over the heads of the provincial premiers by appealing directly to Canada's voters to accept it.

If this ploy fails, then Canada, either as a matter of practical fact, or as a result of independence votes in Alberta and the rest of the West, will be put on the path of increased separatism. After all, even if the Québec vote failed, it *did* establish a precedent for a vote on independence elsewhere in Canada.

Thus, as early as 1983, Canada could start the path of dividing according to interest groups: the New England–like Maritimes going one way, Québec going another, Foundry-like Ontario going a third, the Empty Quarter environs of Alberta going a fourth, and Ecotopian British Columbia and Breadbasket-like Saskatch-

ewan and Manitoba trying to figure out with which neighbor to align themselves, or whether to go their respective ways.

If this scenario were to hold up, the ironies would be boundless. For one thing, it would be unlikely that these newly decentralized provinces would push for U.S. statehood. Why trade one kind of federalism for another?

Another irony is that if Canada had simply let Québec go when it started agitating, the rest of English-speaking Canada might have found enough in common never to push things so far as to have that de-unifying constitutional convention.

Don't get me wrong. Trudeau's "renewed federalism" still could win out. Nationhood is a strong concept. Just because the concept "Canada" is not the most logical one in the world — because of the way its population hugs the United States border, it's been compared to a farm two hundred miles long and one mile wide — doesn't mean it does not retain great emotional power, even among the Québécois. In fact, the "Québécois" have only recently called themselves that. They used to refer to themselves as "les Canadiens." The others were "les Anglais." Canadian national symbols, from the maple leaf to the beaver to the national anthem, "O Canada," were developed by French Canadians for French Canadians. Even the federalists among French Canadians, such as Claude Ryan and Pierre Trudeau himself, strongly assert themselves as Québec nationalists, nonetheless. No, I don't completely understand, either.

This Canadian nationalist fact deeply depresses the die-hard independentists along the university-surrounded Rue St.-Denis in Montréal. But it's a reality that underscores the importance of calculating the real costs of a free Québec or any other "nation."

Calculations like these are so complicated and such fascinating pieces of futurology that one suspects some economists want to see Québec's independence just to compare it to their computer models.

The questions raised in such an analysis serve to define nationalism. For example, federalists claim that Québec now receives more in federal tax money than it pays out. Péquistes say that, though that may be so, the nature of the payments is in welfare checks, and this reflects the poverty caused by centuries of economic oppression. If Québec were to run its own affairs, they say, its money could be used to create jobs, *à la* Hydro Québec. Even if such an attempt were to fail, they add, it would be the Québécois trying and failing, rather than some Anglos whose motives Québécois have every reason to suspect.

Federalists, especially in the far West, say that Québec should be thankful for the markets they provide. After all, they claim, if Canada didn't exist, it would be a lot cheaper for British Columbia to buy its clothing from California or from Asia than from the province of Québec. Péquistes say that, first of all, in the twentieth century, a unified Canada is a British dream, not a French one. If British Columbia wants to create a customs union with Seattle, rather than with the new nation of Québec, fine. It may be economically disruptive, but not as big a blow to Québec as would be the emotional devastation that would grip English Canadians at the idea that their Atlantic provinces would become the eastern portion of another Pakistan. (Pakistan, before half the country revolted and became Bangladesh, also had an East and a West completely separated by another country, India.)

For that matter, a completely independent Québec would be free to explore American markets and tailor its customs policy to the possibilities it found there. If British Columbia wished to open its borders to cheap processed food from the western United States, it would be equally possible for Québec to nurture new import-export relationships in the eastern United States, not to mention Europe and Africa, which it can't now.

There is that tacit political alliance between Québec and the western province of Alberta on this score. When oil-rich Alberta locked horns with the rest of Canada over whether it should sell its petroleum to the other provinces at the world price or at a subsidized rate, remember that Québec, despite its having to import all its hydrocarbons, supported Alberta. Provinces must not be denied control of their resources, Québec solemnly declared, and that includes to whom it sells and at what price.

Speaking of oil, say the federalists, what about the fact that Québec doesn't have any?

That question really frosts the Péquistes. Why not, they ask, point out that we have no elephants? No coconuts? What does that have to do with nationalism? Québec does import oil at the rate of a European country like, say, Germany. But the medium-term energy outlook is brighter for Québec than for a great number of industrialized nations.

Obviously, for openers, Québec does have all that hydro power. While, admittedly, that won't run a car or a jet, it's so cheap in Québec that 80 percent of the new homes built there are electrically heated, and older homes are converting to electric heat at the rate of thirty thousand or forty thousand units a year. Industries like wood pulp are switching over to electricity to dry their

products. What's just beginning to dawn on Québec, too, is the magnitude of the opportunity it could have, exporting this electricity to the Foundry and New England. Already Québec exports hundreds of millions of dollars of power, much of it to Consolidated Edison, the much-maligned New York City utility. And that's surplus power. Con Ed needs electricity most during the summer months to run air conditioners. Québec has lots to give at that time, since Hydro Québec's big season is in winter.

But there's another big export possibility. New England has systematically denied itself new nuclear plants, oil refineries, and even its own large-scale hydroelectric developments, on environmental grounds. Its power needs in the 1980s and 1990s will be so expensive that it may pay Hydro Québec to start damming rivers from which Québec itself doesn't need the power but New England does.

Hydro Québec already supplies Vermont with 7 percent of its power, and talks are under way with other parts of New England, notably Massachusetts and Rhode Island, about their needs.

Nor is that the only way energy can be exported. The most expensive raw material in the manufacture of aluminum is energy. With aluminum in demand for everything from lightweight engine blocks, which increase an automobile's fuel efficiency, to subway cars and airplanes, aluminum could easily become a key Québec energy export.

In fact, economists already point to transportation as one of the most important factors in the development of Québec's economy — the sector, along with services, that will help replace Québec's dependence on the old, slave-wages, rural-craft-like industries like shoes and textiles.

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Québec, as a nation, as a French, North American, independent, proud nation, is such an odd quirk of history that it's possible to spend a portion of an evening sipping cognac in the grand old Hôtel Château Frontenac, pondering how this could possibly have come to be.

Below the romantic, turreted, and bespiked castle of the Château, in the ancient quarter of Québec City, the seagulls loiter, wings outstretched, oblivious of the imposing and impossibly steep heap of green-copper-roofed granite and brick hotel entrenched on the cliffs of the old city of Québec.

They circle the restored Batterie Royale, a collection of black,

muzzle-loading cannon poking through imposing bulwarks of mud and twig. These hulking antiques, on their wooden carriages with wooden wheels, command a clear, 150 degree field of fire, up and down the narrow St. Lawrence, over which the mighty freighters now glide, tugs at their side.

The presence of the guns invites — demands — speculation about how easy it would be to drop a tanker in this channel, blocking Great Lakes shipping as thoroughly as a wreck in the Suez Canal disrupted oil shipments from the Middle East.

An explanatory plaque — in French only, of course — says that in the reign of Louis XIV, Frontenac, governor-general of New France, installed here a similar battery of cannon in the defense of Québec. This artillery came on hard times, through history, until 1977, when archeologists restored the site. On July 3, 1978, the 370th anniversary of La Capitale, these ten pieces of artillery which I see before me, of the model of 1733, were dedicated at this Batterie Royale, in the name of the government of France. Master of ceremonies, René Lévesque, premier of Québec.

Far above this hardware, a bar called the Saint-Laurent, at the bow of the hotel named after Governor-General Frontenac, looms over a panoramic view of the river from atop the Plains of Abraham, where this Québec nonsense started almost four hundred years ago. It's a handsome, wooden, round room with a ceiling carved like the spokes of a ship's wheel.

The foul-weather shutters on the windows are open. The sun's gone down. The yellow lights of harbor traffic reflect off the calm river, as do the arctic blue-green streetlamps of the suburbs on the far hills.

Above the tall wainscoting are the strategically placed models and oil paintings of sailing ships and expanses of plush red velvet inlaid with the national symbol of Québec, the fleur de lys.

Amid the leather upholstery, subtle lighting, and polished brass ship's instruments are placed loveseats, on one of which is a couple taking advantage of the design. They talk. She laughs. He flips up the collar of his sports jacket. She strokes his cheek, his hair. He brushes her arm. She is chic, in a three-piece suit. They kiss. This is ridiculous. There are forty people in this bar. They haven't made Grade B movies out of stuff like this since the forties. Where did she learn to do stuff like that?

This is just too outrageously romantic to fit on this continent. But this is Québec, where public displays of sensuality happen in ways that give clues to national character.

They leave. A husky gent with a mustache and a sweater embroidered with reindeer sits down in their place. I stare so hard, he waves.

Québec, when it comes right down to it, ends up being a nation, not because of industry or armies or stirring political rhetoric, but because when you're there, even if you were to ignore language, you know it's no place else.

The thought processes are different. It's bracing to hear Québec politicians talk about what they're up to in fifteen- or twenty-step tight, Jesuitical, geometric logic. In Washington, it's rare to hear a premise clearly stated, a theory methodically deduced from it, and a conclusion formally offered.

In Washington, similar conversations inevitably become so complex that the language lapses into the jargon of a specialty, be it defense or energy or journalism, in which a lack of knowledge of the meaning of shorthand words that express entire ideas leaves even a thoughtful person out in the cold.

This is not to say that one system is necessarily better or worse, or more or less honest. It's just to say that it's special to hear a Québécois say, "His reasoning is faulty." In Washington, you'd never question anybody's thought process; you'd question his *data*. (Not to mention his motives.)

The sense of time and place is different.

To love Québec, for example, is to love the Pontiac Firebird Trans Am with a 205-bhp, 301–cubic inch V8 and a flaming eagle painted on the hood. Québécois are the worst gas guzzlers left in the world, statistics show. Any street in Québec is testimony to their affection for full-sized LTDs and vroom-vroom Corvettes. Similarly, to hate Québec is to hate traveling at ten or twenty kilometers over the limit and be passed by such a behemoth, through whose dust can be discerned only the words on the license plate: *"Je me souviens"* (I remember). It's a formidable combination in the 1980s to drive like a Frenchman in high-horsepower North American iron.

Their prides are different. Québécois make a very big deal over how terrific their women look, and, indeed, compared to some of the brown thrush understatements of which English Canadian women are capable, Québécoises can be very attractive. Women here are routinely referred to as *"très chic,"* and, in fact, the most striking statements are made by women whose heels are higher, make-up and perfume more pronounced, and fashions more Europe-conscious than others. Yet, by contrast, in, say, Denver,

women can and do make a positive statement by pointedly avoiding being "fashionable," and acquiring a studiedly natural look. Even the politics and culture of good looks are different in Québec from those elsewhere.

They swear differently. And not just because it's in French. In order to get nasty, they don't modify with references to excrement or sex. They modify with words like "tabernacle," "sanctuary," "chalice," and "host." If you really want to lean into a curse, you string them all together, until you get something like: *"Lui, c'est un maudit, chrisse, 'osti, calisse de tabernac'."* That'll get you a bar fight anyplace in the Gaspé.

They even think about their similarities with the rest of the continent in a different fashion. In making the point that, while Québec was French, it was also a distinctly North American culture, one observer said, "Our culture is the way we do things; the way we eat. When we have breakfast, we eat cereal, we eat eggs, we eat bacon."

It's tough to imagine another North American culture trying to bring attention to its singularity by the fact that it eats bacon and eggs.

But, of course, in Québec eating is very important to the way of life. One social scientist tells the story of an elaborate questionnaire sent to both English and French businessmen in Québec in an attempt to determine differences in the way they operated.

The first thing the observer discovered was that the English manager called a meeting in the conference room of his subordinates, where the group formulated their responses.

The French, seeing how extensive the questionnaire was, eagerly seized on the opportunity to hack away at the problem over a long lunch.

No less an authority on gastronomic bliss than Calvin Trillin of *The New Yorker,* who, when in a strange town, automatically distrusts the ethnic cooking of any group not strong enough to elect at least two aldermen, characterizes Montréal as the city in which he was rendered speechless by the fettucine Danielle he encountered in an Italian restaurant on Rue Notre-Dame Ouest.

(For that matter, I ran into an excellent steamed gingered whitefish on the Rue de Bleury in the course of talking to a Vietnamese restaurateur about immigration. Presumably, in his previous life, an air traffic controller for the evacuation of Saigon, this gent insisted on relating everything he could in metaphors of military defeat, and talked of drumming up more business for his

restaurant through the study of voodoo. But I digress.)

Québec's food is so much a part of its culture that it is the final rebuke to those who insist that the interstates and the reprobates have rendered North America as homogeneous and undistinguished as powdered vanilla pudding.

Québec brought a small tear to my eye late one September evening. Forced by horrendous plane connections to break a vow, I found myself in the Montréal Airport Hilton. With town so far away, the wake-up call so early, and my stomach growling, I took myself, with resignation, to the hotel coffee shop. The ambiance was so thoroughly of Atlanta or Houston or Toronto that I was hardly surprised, merely a little depressed, when the hostess illegally failed to greet me in French.

As she led me to my table, I listened to the well-done-sixteen-ounce-T-bone-steak-with-baked-potato-and-salad-with-Roquefort meals being snarfed down all around me and realized that, for the first time in days, I was totally surrounded by English-speakers.

To find out how many different versions of cheeseburger I was faced with, I picked up the menu, only to notice. At the bottom. Handwritten. In French: *"Lapin aux pommes."* Rabbit with apple. A meal of the country. Which turned out to come with a delicate sauce, finely flavored with, I believe, Calvados.

In Québec, I thought with a sigh, picking clean the bones, you can't get a bad meal even at the Hilton.

In Québec, it dawned on me, they resist.

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