43. Relations between Québec and Francophones outside Québec

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Closely associated with the preservation of the French language, the new Québec identity which blossomed after 1960 was also based on the shrinking of frontiers of the French-Canadian nation. Henceforth, the physical territory occupied by Québec became inseparable from the nation’s mental territory which more or less excluded Francophones living outside Québec, regarded as belonging to another space. The government, then, had to devise a policy towards these “Others.” Georges-Émile Lapalme, first Minister of Cultural Affairs, who was given this task, had a precise notion of Québec’s role in French-speaking North America, that of being a metropolis. For him, only the Québec government was in a position to defend the interests of Francophones in North America.

In 1961, the Liberal minister created the Service du Canada français outre-frontières (SCFOF) to ensure relations with these groups. Endowed with a small budget, the organization went about this task by awarding grants within the institutional network of Francophones outside Québec and by creating a news bulletin, the Québec-Amérique, designed as a means of informing Québécois and Francophones across the continent about the activities taking place in their area. At the same time, in 1965, Jean Lesage’s government was beginning to negotiate agreements to ensure that “the interests of the French minorities in the other nine provinces were safeguarded
and that their rights are fully respected.” However, discussions were long and it took four years before agreements were reached with New Brunswick and Ontario.

The Québec government’s policies on Francophone minorities were made in the context of a split in Québec/French-Canadian identity. This was clearly demonstrated during the Estates General of French Canada in 1967. Organized under the aegis of the journal *L’Action nationale* and the Fédération des sociétés Saint-Jean-Baptiste du Québec, the Estates General held their first national conference in Montréal from November 23 to 26, 1967; they brought together some 1,000 delegates, the majority of whom lived in Québec. They were to “dialogue coolly and define the constitutional future of the Nation” by determining “the necessary powers for Québec and the essential rights of French-Canadians living outside Québec.” The Québec delegates agreed on the territorial definition of the nation but their counterparts from the other provinces refused this conception. They could not identify with it and thus did not accept Québec’s new vocation as the national government of French-Canadians. Instead, the heads of the Acadian and French-Canadian institutional networks turned towards Ottawa, seeing federal policies, in particular the Law on Official Languages, as a guarantee for survival.

From 1976, following a period of disengagement under Robert Bourassa’s government, Québec relations with Francophone minorities again became a political issue. The Parti Québécois government courted Francophones outside Québec but its long-term constitutional objectives made the latter distrustful. On April 14, 1977, Claude Morin, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, delivered a speech in which he tried to convince French-Canadians
that a sovereign Québec would use its political weight to favour the promotion of their rights. Morin’s speech announced a change of policy. Québec would abandon its paternalism attached to the notion that it was the motherland of North-American Francophones, replacing it with the idea of a “moral” responsibility towards them. Two months later, he recognized the Fédération des francophones hors Québec (FFHQ), founded in 1975, as the spokesperson for Francophone Canadians. He set up the Direction des affaires de la francophonie hors Québec within the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs and made the FFHQ a party to the policy changes. The new programmes for cooperation were grouped under the name “Entente-Québec.” At the same time, the government established delegations all over North America, some focused on youth, some on seniors and some on fields of activity such as the press. This initiative was so successful that in October 1981 the government set up the Secrétariat permanent des peuples francophones (SPPF) which housed the headquarters of the Société des rencontres francophones. Financed by the Executive Council and closely linked to the Premier’s cabinet, the SPFF also coordinated projects aimed at promoting Francophone identity in North America.

However, the constitutional tensions of the last two decades of the twentieth century led to a hardening of the positions assumed by Québec and Francophone minorities. There were disagreements, notably about the merits of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which enables minorities to make enormous progress, in particular in the field of education, but which is regarded in Québec as an obstacle to the full development of the French fact.
Francophones outside Québec also find insulting the utterances periodically voiced by Québec public figures, such as Yves Beauchemin’s “still warm corpses.” For their part, the Québec representatives found it hard to tolerate that those in charge of Francophone minorities sided with Ottawa during referendum debates and discussions on the Lake Meech Agreement.

In 1995, the government made public the “Québec’s Policy towards Francophone and Acadian Communities in Canada.” Administered by the Secrétariat aux affaires intergouvernementales canadiennes (SAIC), the new policy was based on the assertion that the vitality of the French language was an essential element in the survival, development and progress of Francophones in Canada. It emphasized dialogue, solidarity, the setting up of partnerships and concerted action. Québec would thus avoid falling back into a simple relationship of assistance or of paternalism. The SAIC has at its disposal an annual budget of barely 1.2 million dollars but could be highly influential as the subsidized partnerships are supported by cultural, educational and economic networks. For the first time since 1961, the networks of Québec civil society were reinserted into relations between Québec and Francophone minorities, a reorientation which could prove to be beneficial.