

Revolution in Quebec: Quiet or Otherwise?*

'It is in general a necessary condition of free institutions, that the boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with those of nationalities.' So wrote John Stuart Mill in his *Considerations on Representative Government*. His affirmation is of particularly crucial interest to Canadians today in the midst of the great constitutional debate concerning Quebec. The assumption that the state and the nation should ideally be coextensive is one that is widely, perhaps universally, held by champions of an independent Quebec. 'Nation' is admittedly a notoriously ambiguous word, the definition of which has aroused much acrimonious debate. For present purposes it will be taken to denote a distinct people characterized by common descent, language, and culture. Why, it is asked, should the rights, the culture, the destiny of a nation be subject to any interference or control by peoples outside that nation? Can such a nation be free except in so far as its members are solely and entirely responsible for their own affairs? Apparently President Charles de Gaulle, with his triumphal 'Vive le Québec libre!' was quite sure that the answer to this rhetorical question was self-evident. But is it?

The historian, Lord Acton, a champion of freedom and relentless critic of inordinate political power, vigorously disputed the assumption that nation and state should ideally coincide. In an essay on 'Nationality' he contended that, when the authority of the state is representative of a single national group, the threat to freedom and the risk of tyrannical government are real and immediate. For such a state, containing no sizeable minorities, will have no group strong enough to challenge the centralized power of a homogeneous state. Conversely, Lord Acton asserted, private rights are more likely to be recognized and protected when more than one nation is included in the state. He wrote:

Liberty provokes diversity, and diversity preserves liberty by supplying the means of organization. ... This diversity in the same State is a firm barrier against the intrusion of the government beyond the political sphere which is common to all into the social department which escapes legislation and is ruled by spontaneous laws. ... That intolerance of social freedom which is natural to absolutism is sure to find a corrective in the national diversities, which no other force could so efficiently provide. The coexistence of several nations under the same State is a test, as well as the best security of its freedom. It is also one of the chief instruments of civilization.¹

Acton thus provides persuasive support for the view that Canada is likely

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1. J. Acton. *Essays on Freedom and Power* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 160.

to ensure her citizens greater freedom because of the presence of 'deux nations' than she would without Quebec. And by the same token, the Quebec separatist might be mistaken in supposing that independence, the establishment of a unilingual, unicultural state coinciding with the French-speaking Quebec nation, would automatically ensure that freedom which he so ardently claims and desires.

The separatist is not likely to be convinced, however, by such logic, right and reasonable though it might seem. For he is persuaded that the evidence proves otherwise. Is not the French-speaking citizen more often than not a victim of condescension, prejudice, and discrimination? Does he not face obstacles to communicating in his mother tongue, limited opportunity for advancement in business and industry, economic exploitation by outsiders? Beset by frustration, humiliation, and insult even within his own province, he responds eagerly to the clarion call to be 'maîtres chez nous.' For a small but growing number, this is understood to mean one thing only – complete political and economic as well as social and cultural independence.

If Lord Acton is unconvincing in his plea for national diversity within a state, it is not simply because the historical evidence might seem to dispute his contention, but because nothing is likely to outweigh the powerful emotional identification of freedom with national independence. Even the most moderate voices of French Canada endorse the slogan 'maîtres chez nous,' and take it for granted this must mean a larger measure of political autonomy for the Quebec nation. It is by no means agreed, however, where the line should be drawn between complete separation and partial co-operation with the rest of Canada, or whether any such line is possible.

Can Violence be Justified?

The sharper division of opinion in Quebec, however, is over the question of method. Up to the present, the revolution has been generally quiet, with only sporadic outbursts of violence from time to time. There is probably wide acceptance of the position that violent revolution cannot be justified except as a last resort. In March 1963, the Front de Libération Québécois (FLQ) instigated a series of bombings in which one man was killed and another seriously maimed. Gérard Pelletier voiced the revulsion of most of his compatriots in these words: 'What madness makes them forget that nothing can justify terrorism in a social system such as ours where all forms of political action are legal and accessible to everyone?' He conceded that 'when oppression is such as to justify violence and secrecy, when every other approach has been cut off, then prison becomes an honour.' He mentioned the underground forces against the Nazis, and the Muslims in Algeria as examples of men who had no alternative. 'But when democratic processes are available and yet terrorism is chosen instead, this choice can only lead to a harvest of shame, of blame, and of contempt.'²

2. *La Presse*, 18 May 1963, quoted in Michael Oliver and F. R. Scott (eds.), *Quebec States Her Case* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964), p. 89.

Although the consensus among French-speaking people of Quebec was fully in accord with this rejection of terrorism, a certain ambivalence of feeling was noted. Léon Dion of université Laval called attention to this equivocal attitude, which revealed itself in a disposition to excuse and even to sympathize with the young terrorists of the FLQ. He warned that 'with the gradual suppression of our moral conscience's resistance against violence' there would arise 'around our freedoms the infernal circle of terrorist activities and police repression.'³ One of the dangers arising from the use of violence to effect revolution is that strong, even repressive, measures may be adopted for the sake of restoring order and security. Fearing that disorders may lead to anarchy and chaos, a people will welcome the strong, even the tyrannical, ruler. It is contended, for example, that disorders in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal were the occasion, if not the cause, of the dictatorial regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, and Salazar. Widespread lawlessness poses a very grave threat to freedom, for as an eminent jurist puts it, 'where licentiousness is tolerated, liberty is in the utmost danger, for tyranny, bad as it is, is better than anarchy, and the worst of governments is more tolerable than no government at all.'⁴

The establishment and preservation of order is the first object of society and the first duty of government, hence the state is entrusted with a monopoly of coercive force. When violence breaks out and the restraints of law are weakened, the very existence of the state may be threatened by anarchy and chaos. Herbert Butterfield accounts for the emergence of this threat by something in the very nature of man which, in Christian doctrine, would be called 'original sin':

The plain truth is that if you were to remove certain subtle safeguards in society many men who had been respectable all their lives would be transformed by the discovery of the things which it was now possible to do with impunity; weak men would apparently take to crime who had previously been kept on the rails by a certain balance existing in society; and you can produce a certain condition of affairs in which people go plundering and stealing though hitherto throughout their lives it had never occurred to them even to want to steal.⁵

Champions of freedom and social justice like Gérard Pelletier and Léon Dion, then, have ample reason to warn their fellow citizens about the dangers in violent revolution. Not only would an increase of crime be inevitable, but there would be a grave risk of tyrannical governments being accepted as an alternative to anarchy, with the result that the revolutionaries would fail to attain the very freedoms for which they were striving. Indeed, there would in all likelihood be a net loss of freedom. According to Hannah Arendt, this verdict is confirmed by evidence provided by the revolutions that have taken

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

4. T. M. Taylor, *The Discipline of Virtue* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 3.

5. H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Bell, 1949), p. 30.

place in this century. 'We know to our sorrow,' she writes, 'that freedom has been better preserved in countries where no revolution ever broke out, no matter how outrageous the circumstances of the powers that be, and there exist more civil liberties even in countries where revolution was defeated than in those where revolutions have been victorious.'⁶ In this century, when the world has become a global village, one factor that complicates and jeopardizes the success of any revolution is the extreme probability of intervention by foreign powers. Advocates of violent revolution in Quebec would do well to think of what happened in Hungary, in the Dominican Republic, in Vietnam.

The Strategy of Violence

If the prospects for successful revolution are so bleak, how is it that men can be persuaded to attempt it? The answer is to be found in the extent to which men are ruled by their hearts, not their heads. When patience with the peaceful processes of democratic change runs out, when the shining ideals of justice, equality, and freedom seem remote, what is to be done? The answer, for nationalists who want action now, is a call to arms: 'Quebec Patriots, to arms! The hour of national revolution has struck! Independence or death!'⁷ There is bravado, excitement, promise of adventure in such a call; no sober reflection or rational argument can match its appeal. Violence is justified by an emotional dedication to a righteous cause, but it is also vindicated on the grounds of inexorable necessity. For the revolutionist is convinced, and must convince others, that this path is the only one left, that violence is the only weapon now appropriate to the situation, that revolution is inevitable. The issues are drawn in black and white, and moderates who are willing to engage in dialogue with the other side must now be denounced as traitors.⁸ Alienation from the other side tends to be total, and hatred of the oppressor is encouraged.⁹

It may be useful to note that violent revolution differs in both its methods and its goal from civil disobedience, contrary to what Henry David Thoreau implied when he wrote: 'All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny and its inefficiency are great and unendurable.' Civil disobedience generally shuns violence. It is not usually directed toward the end of overthrowing government, thereby threatening the order of the state. Rather, as in Thoreau's own case, it may entail defiance of a particular law, the refusal to obey a specific rule or edict deemed to be unjust, in the hope of changing or eliminating it. Civil disobedience is deliberately open and public, inviting punishment for the sake of arousing attention to what is regarded as an issue of importance. Revolution, on the other hand, necessarily requires secret organization and, at least initially, underground conspiracy and activity. The difference

6. H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 111.

7. From the FLQ manifesto.

8. Cf. André Major, in Oliver and Scott, *Quebec States Her Case*, p. 76.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 75.

is not absolute, of course, for widespread civil disobedience could, like violent revolution, result in disorder and anarchy. But many would admit that civil disobedience is occasionally right and necessary who would balk at condoning violent revolution.

According to sociologists, the strategy of violent revolution follows a recognizable pattern of thought and action. In the ferment of revolutionary thinking, ideology looms so important that persons are accounted of worth only as they contribute to the accepted scheme or goal. Slogans, stereotypes, and symbols play a major role; the violent act is exalted as a symbol of the struggle. Thus, the bomb is placed in a mail box because the latter signifies federalist oppression; the statue of royalty is demolished because of its association with the hated enemy. In the initial stages of revolution, such violent acts are intended or expected, not to achieve any drastic change, but to produce certain proximate, immediate results: to build morale by giving the illusion of strength; to make it impossible to ignore the issue; to create disorder.

This last objective, the creation of disorder, is largely psychological rather than physical. The violent act is designed to arouse anxiety, as well as morbid curiosity about where the next blow will fall. If mail boxes are dangerous, how can one be sure of safety anywhere? The opponent may become sufficiently alarmed to transfer his assets or even move his family to a more secure location. Even the uncommitted or neutral members of society may panic, if they can be made to feel that the existing order is crumbling, and cast about for some panacea to end their uncertainty. Or the powers that be may be goaded by fearful citizens into foolish and unwarranted measures of retaliation, justifying the revolutionist's charge of oppression and gaining popular support for the cause. Care is taken, however, especially in the early stages of revolution, not to incite too severe counter-activity, lest the forces of revolt be destroyed before they can gain a secure foothold. Moreover, too ruthless acts of terrorism run the risk of arousing less sympathy than anger, or of creating a backlash of guilt and remorse that reduces the possibility of gaining popular support. Many of these factors, including the last, seem to have been present in the FLQ activity in Quebec.

A central feature of all such strategic considerations is the necessity of breaking down rational discussion and moderate opinion on both sides, by the creation of tension and the heightening of emotion. For if, as suggested earlier, the rational prospect of gaining freedom through revolution is far from bright, appeals to necessity and to emotion must be fostered, thereby obliterating those rational considerations that might compel sound judgment to reject the revolution.

Clearly, then, the possibility of successful revolution depends on more than the zeal, the determination, and the skill of its leaders and proponents. As we have already noted, the governing authorities may be moved by the hostile emotions of their constituents to strike back at real violence or potentially dangerous actions with punishment far beyond the requirements of social order, thus serving rather than thwarting the revolutionary cause. But

they may under-react as well as over-react, misjudging the power of appeal in the call to independence, minimizing the grievances of the 'oppressed' people, showing an unwillingness to 'rock the boat' by taking serious action of any kind. In the last analysis, however, a revolution is not likely to be successful, or even possible, unless there is fertile soil in which the seeds of revolt may be sown.

How Would Quebec Respond?

The social scientists tell us that there are certain characteristics to look for among people who are vulnerable to revolutionary appeals. For example, people who have been conditioned to accept the necessity of a depressed or restricted condition will also be prepared to accept the necessity of violence to effect social change. Nothing short of violent revolution may seem to offer the hope of attaining justice, freedom and other rights of citizenship to men who know nothing about the possibilities and responsibilities of peaceable democratic change. If men are accustomed to the cult of the strong man and autocratic rule, or to a rigidly structured society in which differences are not tolerated, the revolutionary zealot may find them ready and willing to heed a call to arms and freedom.

Whether the people of Quebec possess any of these characteristics may be a moot question. Undoubtedly, they qualify as fertile ground for revolution in regard to such other essentials as a territorial base and ethnic, linguistic, and religious distinctiveness. It is doubtful, however, whether there now exist in Quebec 'extreme differences between the pattern of life of the urban and industrialized segment of the population, and that of the rural elements.' Moreover, Quebec is rapidly shifting from an agrarian to a highly complex industrial society, a shift which greatly diminishes the likelihood of revolution.¹⁰ There is reasonable ground, then, for doubting whether violent revolution can now be regarded as a live possibility in the province of Quebec.

Reducing the Threat

In any case, forces that diminish the probability of violent revolution are already at work in Quebec and can be further nourished. In the first place, it should go without saying that legitimate grievances will be dealt with as forcefully, as quickly, and as completely as possible. Beyond this, the likelihood of revolt is greatly minimized when citizens have the opportunity to participate in government at local levels. It was de Tocqueville who declared: 'Local assemblies of citizens constitute the strength of free nations. Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within

10. For a valuable discussion of the conditions under which a revolution can be deemed feasible, cf. Lucien W. Pye, 'The Roots of Insurgency and the Commencement of Rebellion,' in Harry Eckstein (ed.), *Internal War* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 163.

the people's reach; they teach men how to use and enjoy it.' The transfer of authority and responsibility from a powerful, centralized government to various local bodies is a trend that, within practicable limits, cannot fail to reduce the appeal of separatism.

The deepest benefit a citizen derives from participating in the processes of local government is the feeling of achievement, the sense of personal worth, which he is thereby enabled to gain. This satisfaction may be reinforced or nullified, according to whether or not he finds comparable opportunities for personal initiative and achievement in his vocation and for social recognition in his community life. Social mobility is an important ingredient in opening up such possibilities. Barriers of language, education, or ethnic origin may inhibit such mobility, as many a French-speaking Canadian has found to his sorrow and chagrin. But anything that confines men to a particular locale or 'ghetto,' hampering their initiative and sense of achievement, is likely to foster that sense of frustration and failure which is all too readily stirred by resentment and hostility to acts of violence against the powers that be.

Generally speaking, religion provides an element of stability for a social order. Men with a religious outlook, convinced that life's fulfilment does not depend exclusively on what happens in society, are inclined to accept political and social conditions as they find them. A mature religious viewpoint may also temper fanaticism by reminding men that no ideology or political ideal is flawless. To this extent, then, there is validity in Marx's charge that religion is an opiate of the people. Revolutionaries, it is observed, are not notably religious. At the same time, it is well known that religious zeal and political revolutionary fervour are a particularly explosive and violent combination.

Can a Christian Support Violent Revolution?

What should the Christian's attitude be to violent revolution? There may be no simple answer, but a few pertinent factors may be noted briefly. Jesus was sentenced to death as a revolutionary, but he expressly rejected the Zealot solution to tyranny and oppression. He taught men to give due allegiance to Caesar, but not to render to Caesar what was due to God alone. Similarly, Paul admonished Christian friends to be subject to the higher powers who are God's instruments of order, but he too was executed probably because he was unwilling to give total allegiance to the state. In the Book of Revelation, the overthrow of a wicked state to make room for the righteous reign of God is predicted, but it is not clear that Christians should precipitate that overthrow by acts of violence. In general the position of the New Testament seems to be that the Christian's attitude toward the state should be one of tension and hope for transformation rather than mere submission or defiant revolution.

In a Christian perspective, no ideology nor any ideal goal, however worthy, can be given priority over the worth of the individual. Since the time of Constantine the church has generally conceded that in cases of extreme op-

pression and tyranny, when no alternative seems possible, violent revolution may be necessary. But it must always be asked whether alternatives are *ever* clearly and completely ruled out. Moreover, as the testimony of political scientists and sociologists seems to indicate, the expectation of achieving desirable results – an increase of freedom and justice – through violent revolution, may be a vain delusion. Above all, the divisions and hatreds fostered by revolution must be regarded as contrary to the Christian mission of reconciliation among all men. Even with a minimum of violence and bloodshed, the goal of separatism must be rejected as representing a narrow nationalism instead of the Christian ideal of the brotherhood of men. Whether violent revolution is ever justified may be open to doubt, but it cannot conceivably be supported or approved in Quebec at the present time, when there is no evidence of extreme tyranny, when on the contrary we can point to an almost unlimited number of alternatives whereby peaceful change can be effected.