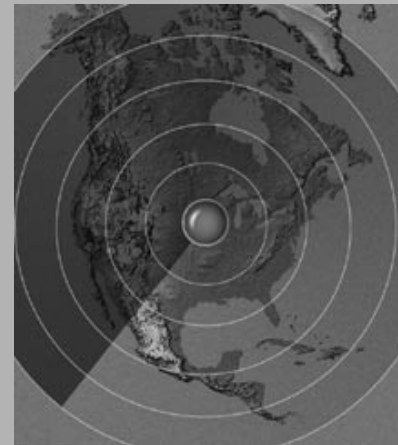


ALL QUEBEC'S FAULT, AGAIN? QUEBEC PUBLIC OPINION AND CANADA'S REJECTION OF MISSILE DEFENCE

Pierre Martin

What is the extent of the difference between Quebec and the rest of Canada on missile defence? How can we account for this difference? Was Quebec's negative assessment of Canada's participation the determining factor in Ottawa's decision? Pierre Martin asks these pertinent question on Quebec's fervent opposition to missile defence — the highest of any region of the country. Where Quebec had won the favour of continentalists and invoked the wrath of Canadian nationalists by massively supporting the Free Trade Agreement in 1988, it has invoked the displeasure of continentalists and won the favour of nationalists by its opposition to missile defence. Blame it on Quebec — again.

Jusqu'où le Québec et le reste du Canada diffèrent-ils d'avis sur la défense antimissile ? Comment expliquer cette divergence d'opinion ? Le jugement négatif du Québec sur la participation canadienne a-t-il déterminé la décision d'Ottawa ? Pierre Martin soulève d'intéressantes questions sur l'opposition du Québec à la défense antimissile, plus forte que partout ailleurs au pays. Si cette province s'était gagné les faveurs des continentalistes et la colère des nationalistes canadiens pour avoir appuyer massivement l'Accord de libre-échange en 1988, voilà qu'elle s'attire maintenant le mécontentement des continentalistes et se rallie les nationalistes en s'opposant à la défense antimissile. Une fois de plus, tout est la faute du Québec...



When Paul Martin announced his government's decision not to support the US plan to start deploying a system of ballistic missile defence (BMD), all eyes turned to Quebec public opinion, which has remained consistently opposed to this policy, and to the Liberals' electoral travails in that province, which are not about to end, as the key factors in explaining the decision.

As explanation, this is not entirely off the mark, but it is far from complete. Quebec public opinion was opposed to the idea of missile defence, and there are good reasons for this, not the least of which being that maybe it isn't such a great idea.

When Jean Chrétien announced that Canada would not support the US-led invasion of Iraq in March of 2003, many observers concluded that this decision was prompted by his preoccupation with the potential effect of his decision on the prospects of Quebec Liberals at the outset of a provincial election campaign. There are serious reasons to doubt this hypothesis, even if one accepts the shaky assumption that Chrétien ever entertained the idea

of supporting the invasion. Still, for many in English Canada who might have wished a different outcome, as well as for some US conservatives who could blame Canada's reaction on the long arm of France's influence on Quebec, the notion that it was all Quebec's fault became a convenient cop out.

There was another thorny issue, however, that Chrétien was more than willing to pass on to his successor, and it was what to do about the US decision to deploy a complex, costly and unproven system of ballistic missile defence. On this issue, as for the Iraq war, Quebecers have been consistently more opposed than other Canadians, which led many to believe that Paul Martin abandoned his initially favourable stance toward missile defence because of fears that this would irremediably weaken his party in Quebec, which was already hard hit by the emerging sponsorship scandal.

This interpretation leads to three questions. What is the extent of the difference of opinion between Quebec and the rest of Canada on ballistic missile defence? How can we

account for this difference? Was Quebec's negative assessment of Canada's participation the determining factor in Ottawa's decision?

The first step is to assess the magnitude of differences between Quebecers and other Canadians on this issue. A recent poll by Decima (March 10-14), showed that 63 percent of Quebecers agreed with the government's decision, while only 17 percent thought it was the wrong choice. In other provinces, 55 percent agreed and 29 disagreed. The differences are significant, but not spectacular. Indeed, as for many opinion items on military affairs, one finds similar differences between men (54/33) and women (60/18), and an even wider margin between the youngest age cohort (74/16) and the rest of the sample. A clear difference also is observed across political parties, with the Bloc and NDP partisans strongly opposed to BMD, the Conservatives broadly favourable, and opinion among Liberals mirroring the figures observed for Quebec.

Sharper differences emerge from a poll taken immediately after the announcement and published by the *National Post* on February 28. Compas found a wider margin of 69 percent opposition in Quebec (21 percent support), compared with 49 percent of opposition and 41 percent of support in other provinces (sample of 508). Compas also observed that opponents, particularly in Quebec, were firmer in their beliefs than supporters, and more resistant to arguments in favour of missile defence, suggesting that the Liberals might have lost precious debating points in Quebec had they chosen to support the missile shield.

Not all polls reveal such wide differences, however. For example, a September 2004 Pollara survey found a narrow majority of 49 percent against and 44 percent in favour across Canada. In Quebec, the corresponding figures were 53 percent and 39 percent.

A slight majority of Liberal supporters approved BMD.

Overall, available data show a consistent pattern of stronger opposition to BMD in Quebec. Why? Several hypotheses can be explored. First, I put the issue in broader historical context by linking it to a deeply rooted Quebec tradition of antimilitarism. Second, I look at the role of elites and activists in shaping opinion. Third, I explore the question of whether opposition to BMD was caused by a resurgence of anti-Americanism in Quebec.

Differences of opinion between Quebecers and other Canadians on defence matters are nothing new. Indeed, as long as surveys have recorded the public's preferences, French Canadians or Quebecers have been less supportive of militarism and war. The most salient manifestations of this tendency, of course, came when conscription sharply divided French and

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English Canadians during the two world wars. During the Cold War, as James Iain Gow documented in a 1970 article, French-speaking Quebecers' opinions continued to reflect isolationism and opposition to militarism and imperialism, but Gow noted an evolution toward more openness. Today, although surveys still register slightly lower measures of internationalism in Quebec, few would argue that the province is isolationist.

Anti-militarism, however, remains present. In a recent study for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, Jean-Sébastien Rioux calls this pattern the "common wisdom," and sees little evidence against it. As he rightly observes, however, this does not mean that Quebecers are invari-

ably hostile to the military or incapable to accept the sacrifices required in pursuit of a sound defence policy. If they can be convinced by sensible arguments that a given military venture serves their country's best interests, they won't stand against it.

Was the case for BMD convincingly made to Quebecers? To ask this question is to answer it. In Quebec as in the rest of Canada, there was indeed a debate among specialists and opinion leaders on the merits of giving a nod of approval to missile defence. Although discussions in Quebec were less strident than those in English Canada, the perception that this episode reveals a syndrome of *pensée unique* in Quebec society is a gross exaggeration.

Military experts are not legion in Quebec or French Canada, but many of them dutifully weighed in on the debate. Their arguments reflect the ambiguities involved in the decision to

join BMD. For example, Jocelyn Coulon wrote several columns in *La Presse* condemning missile defence as a misguided US policy, which Canada had no moral justification to join. For their part, Michel Fortmann, Stéphane Roussel, Daniel Brisson, and the former ambassador Raymond Chrétien acknowledged the shortcomings of the US missile plan but argued in favour of Canada's support nonetheless, because of the centrality of the bilateral relationship for Canada's security and prosperity.

These arguments were mirrored in contrasting editorials in *Le Devoir*, which opposed a Canadian endorsement of BMD, and *La Presse*, which favoured it. Many other groups and individuals also joined the debate,

mostly to express opposition to BMD, but this pattern is not entirely different from simultaneous debates in English-speaking Canada. There, debates on missile defence were no less — perhaps more — animated than in French Quebec, and critics were regularly filling the op-ed pages of newspapers, when they were not filling the streets of Vancouver or Toronto. In

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fact, although protests against the Iraq war drew larger crowds in Quebec, protests against endorsement of missile defence were more successful in other parts of Canada. Overall, the balance of ideas and opinions expressed in Quebec on missile defence was not wildly at variance with what could be observed in English Canada.

Where there was a major difference, however, was in the “non-debate” among politicians. While the Bloc Québécois never shied away from denouncing BMD endorsement, the federal Liberals in Quebec, and even the few who call themselves Conservatives, never raised their voice on the issue, one way or another. Inside the party machines, however, there were animated debates. The youth wing of the federal Liberals, for example, actively lobbied for rejection. Quebec Conservatives also tried to tone down their party's enthusiasm for alignment with US security policy, but their line of arguments seemed to be based more on electoral considerations than on any sense of conviction about the policy itself.

On complex issues of foreign policy, citizens most often take their cues from political leaders. Indeed, in most polls on the missile defence issue, party affiliation tends to be the most consistent predictor of individual opinion. Put simply, when party leaders express clearly and forceful-

ly the reasons for their party's policy preferences, partisans tend to align with the leaders they trust. In English-speaking Canada, the leaders of the NDP and the Conservative Party were able to convince sizable majorities of their partisans, while Liberals took positions on both sides to fill the void left by the prime minister's dithering. In Quebec, all partisan voices pointed in the same

direction, predictably leading to a lopsided distribution of views in the public.

This pattern is reminiscent of the debates on the Free Trade Agreement in the late 1980s, when English-Canadian political leaders were deeply divided while the quasi-totality of federal and provincial representatives in Quebec sided in favour of free trade. Convinced by the arguments of their political leaders, Quebecers supported free trade in much greater proportions than other Canadians. Today, free trade has become a fact of life in Quebec and no credible politician in the province advocates setting the clock of economic integration back twenty years.

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There are signs that Quebecers might have recently become not only much more critical of US foreign and domestic policies, but also much less sympathetic to Americans. In a recent conference at McGill, political scientist

David Haglund asked rhetorically whether Quebec has an *obsession anti-américaine*, answering cautiously that it seems to be going in that direction. Exhibit One in Haglund's case was a ten-country survey done in the run-up to the November 2004 US election, which asked respondents to choose between George W. Bush and John Kerry, and to rate their approval of Americans as a people. In most countries, John Kerry won impressive majorities. In Quebec, support for Bush was much lower than in the rest of Canada, and lower (at 11 percent) than in any country in the sample, including France. What Haglund finds stunning, however, is the lukewarm rating that Quebecers give to Americans as a people. With only 53 percent favourable against 44 percent unfavourable to Americans, Quebecers were much below other Canadians (respectively, 79 and 17 percent).

As the saying goes, *une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps*, and neither does one poll necessarily indicate an irreversible trend. Not too long ago, a few months into the first Bush mandate and a few days before the tragic events of September 11, 2001, a Leger Marketing poll actually showed Quebecers to be the most favourably inclined toward the United States on various indicators, even if they also were the least favourably inclined toward Bush himself. What would explain this reversal? Part of the answer must lie with the radicalization of US foreign policy, but also with perceptions of a sharp turn to the right domestically, and increasingly salient cultural differences between Americans and Quebecers. Indeed, if it is true that social values have been diverging between the US and Canada in recent years, it is no less true that the values gap between the US and Quebec has been growing even wider. Reassuringly, perhaps, the 2004 *La Presse* poll also showed that 89 percent of Quebecers (and 95 percent of other Canadians) considered

it important to maintain good relations with the United States.

Even if we admit that Quebecers' views of the United States have deteriorated, is this a good explanation for the rejection of missile defence? There are good reasons to doubt this interpretation. For example, in 1989 and 1990, when Quebecers were decried by nationalist Canadians as excessively pro-American because of their instrumental role in the passage of the Free Trade Agreement, polls consistently registered much lower levels of support for military cooperation with the US in Quebec than in the rest of Canada. Also, early polls on BMD, conducted before Quebecers' opinion of Americans as a people turned sour, showed the same pattern of differences in opinions between Quebec and other provinces.

Was Quebec's negative assessment of Canada's participation the determinant factor in Ottawa's decision? Of course, as they prepare to fight an early election under the dark cloud of the sponsorship scandal, Quebec Liberals must be relieved not to have to debate with the Bloc on missile defence. In retrospect, however, it is not clear whether missile defence would actually have made much difference in Quebec in the 2004 election had the prime minister swiftly decided on the issue upon assuming power in December 2003. Few would have been surprised then if he had taken a favourable position on BMD. After all, his first minister of national defence, David Pratt, had openly expressed his support for BMD, and many observers expected Martin to use this symbolic issue to signal a clean break from his predecessor on Canada-US relations, while continuing to oppose the Iraq intervention.

At that time, unfavourable Quebec opinion was far from the only source of political resistance preventing Martin from coming out of the closet on missile defence. In his own caucus, the most vocal opponents of BMD were from outside Quebec and expressed their opinion with passion, while supporters remained low-key.

Within weeks of the transition, the new Liberal leader had already done all he could to alienate the likes of Sheila Copps and Carolyn Parrish in his caucus. Thus, the political costs of taking a step that everyone was expecting him to take at the time would have been minimal.

None of this happened, and Martin preferred to postpone the BMD announcement until after the 2004 election. From that point, the more Martin waited and dithered around the issue, the more he contributed to erase early expectations of support and to reinforce the resolve of opponents within his own caucus. For example, when the prime minister asked George Bush to guarantee that the US would never place weapons of any kind into space, he must have known that this was an unrealistic demand. Still, the president's predictable refusal became one more argument for opponents. Some have argued that the Bush administration and its envoy to Ottawa maladroitly tried to bully the Martin government, thereby reinforcing the prime minister's incentive to bend to his nationalist critics. That is a fair criticism, but this attitude on the part of the US would not have been an issue had the prime minister taken a clear stand at the earliest possible time.

In 1988, nationalists blamed Quebecers for the FTA. They were right. Without the multiparty consensus that formed in Quebec around free trade and the solid support of its public, North America would not look the same today. Today, the choice is about missile defence and, ironically, it is now the continentalists who blame Quebec for what they see as a major setback. They are not altogether wrong, but the BMD issue is mostly symbolic and doesn't even begin to approach the importance of the free trade decision. Moreover, there is plenty of blame to go around. In electoral terms, I would venture to guess that the Liberals were just as concerned with losing support on their left in Ontario as they were with the

handful of seats that might have been affected in Quebec.

In conclusion, whether or not Americans should sink billions of their own dollars — or of the dollars that the Chinese are now willing to lend them — into a system that only has a small chance of intercepting missiles that only have a very small probability of being sent was their choice to make. They chose to do it, and millions of Americans disagreed, including a fair number of knowledgeable experts and even generals, who saw this either as a risky strategic venture or simply as a misguided allocation of resources. If most Quebecers preferred not to endorse this policy, in other words, they were in good company.

But Canada's choice was neither costly, nor strategically significant in global terms. For the sake of argument, let's assume for the moment that endorsing missile defence was a sensible choice for Canada and that Martin believed this. After all, what is the big difference between endorsing the interception of incoming explosives at 35,000 feet — which has been Canada's policy in NORAD for half a century — and wanting to intercept incoming explosives traveling faster and at higher altitudes? If that is what he believed, then the blame should be laid on the PM's lack of leadership. How difficult would it have been to defend a cost-free decision of no real global strategic consequence (Canada's decision, that is) in the name of maintaining good relations with the country's most important ally and economic partner, when about 90 percent of all Canadians, including Quebecers, agree that it should be an important goal of Canada's foreign policy?

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