

# REMEMBERING ROBERT BOURASSA

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Ten years ago this month, Robert Bourassa died, less than three years after leaving office as premier of Quebec in January 1994. He served four terms and nearly 15 years in office during three decades — the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. One of the most enduring political figures of his time, he walked away from one constitutional agreement at Victoria in 1971, brokered another at Meech Lake in 1987 and lived the political consequence of its death in 1990 before the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord in 1992. His former chief of staff reflects on the legacy of the only leader in Canadian history to regain the leadership of his party after losing it.

Il y a 10 ans ce mois-ci, Robert Bourassa s'éteignait moins de trois ans après avoir quitté le pouvoir en janvier 1994. Il avait remporté quatre élections et dirigé le Québec pendant près de 15 ans sur une période de trois décennies allant des années 1970 aux années 1990. L'une des figures politiques les plus marquantes de son temps, il s'était retiré en 1971 d'un premier accord constitutionnel à Victoria, en avait négocié un autre au lac Meech en 1987 puis avait essuyé les conséquences politiques de son échec en 1990, avant d'assister en 1992 au rejet de l'Accord de Charlottetown. Son ancien chef de cabinet retrace l'héritage du seul chef politique de l'histoire canadienne ayant reconquis la direction de son parti après en avoir été éloigné.

Ten years ago, on October 2, 1996, former Quebec premier Robert Bourassa passed away. To the political and journalistic world, it marked the end of an era and the departure of an influential political figure from the political scene. First elected in 1970 as Quebec's youngest premier at 36, he won four of five general elections and went on to govern Quebec in two separate terms for over 14 years.

His first term lasted from 1970 to 1976, when he lost power to the sovereignist Parti Québécois led by René Lévesque. This defeat led to the birth of polarized politics in Quebec between separatist and federalist political parties, which has been a characteristic of Quebec politics ever since. While considered a politician of the past following this loss, Bourassa never gave up and returned to recapture power in 1985 in a Rocky-type comeback unparalleled in Canadian history. His second term ended in January 1994 when he retired from active politics.

It can be said that studying the Bourassa years can help us better understand Quebec politics and its complexities. Robert Bourassa was a mirror of the complexity, the ambiguity and the determination associated with politics in Quebec. Who then was this influential and, to a large extent, enigmatic figure?

Soon after his defeat in 1976, Bourassa went to Europe to study how the European Union functioned and taught

in various universities in both Quebec and the United States. René Lévesque was governing Quebec and preparing to face off in a referendum on sovereignty-association with the new Liberal leader of the day, influential journalist Claude Ryan. However, as we discovered later, Robert Bourassa was already planning his comeback.

Bourassa began his slow, meticulous return to power by remaining close to his Liberal roots while embarking on his journey in academia and the world of research. Little is written about his role in the 1980 referendum. Yet he was active and always willing to debate the more ideological and hard-line sovereignist leaders such as Jacques Parizeau and the more radical Pierre Bourgault. And he would debate in student venues, never hesitating to put forward his belief in the federalist option and presenting a vision of federalism patterned along the emerging model in Europe. He may have been under the radar to most observers in this campaign, but it was Robert Bourassa launching his return and finally escaping from his political purgatory. When Claude Ryan resigned the leadership of the Quebec Liberals in 1982, Bourassa did not hesitate and made his move.

He easily won his party's leadership race in October 1983. Author and journalist L. Ian MacDonald appropriately titled his book about this period *From Bourassa to Bourassa*. Yes, the former premier was back and somewhat

vindicated within a Quebec that had already declared his political demise just a few years earlier. He was to be once again the dominant political figure in Quebec for the next decade.

Much has been made of his early and close relationship with René Lévesque when the latter was still a Liberal in the 1960s. After the Quebec Liberals lost power to the Union Nationale in 1966, a group of reform-minded Liberals led by Lévesque began to explore other political options for Quebec. For Lévesque, this meant sovereignty, and he was ready to propose his brand of political separatism to his fellow Liberals in the summer of 1967. Even Lévesque held out the hope that Robert Bourassa would make his conversion. He was wrong. Lévesque left to launch his separatist movement. Bourassa stayed a Liberal and in 1970 became leader of the party and went on to win the election in April of that year.

Many federal politicians close to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau never felt comfortable with what they considered Bourassa's lukewarm federalism. They were reinforced in this belief when, shortly after Bourassa became premier in 1970, a constitutional round began and eventually resulted in the Victoria Charter, granting a political veto to Quebec on future constitutional change. Bourassa ultimately rejected the deal, further alienating the Trudeau Liberals, who were already suspicious of his commitment to federalism.

Was Bourassa a closet sovereignist? Actually, Bourassa was very much a convinced federalist but his view of federalism was more rational than emotional. The lure of the Rockies or the call of the country from "sea to sea to sea" was never a compelling argument to preserve national unity.

Rather, he believed that the future of Quebec was better served

within a political system that recognized diversity and regional differences, based on an economic common market, a common currency

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and democratically based common political institutions. These are the reasons why he did not follow Lévesque in his shift to the sovereignty option. Granted, he did not believe in status quo federalism, but sovereignty was uncertain and he doubted its economic viability. Moreover, he believed then that the breakup of Canada could lead to the isolation of Quebec within North America.

Throughout his political career, he never wavered in his conviction that federalism was the better course. Pushed to the limit, Bourassa believed that it was more logical and a better recipe for balanced federalism if we had five regions as opposed to ten provinces. He knew, however, that this was hardly a possibility, and he was willing to participate in the existing process as evidenced by his role regarding the Victoria Charter, Meech Lake Accord and Charlottetown Accord.

When it came to the Constitution and Quebec's future in Canada, he was a master of vocabulary. Bourassa could in a phrase summarize his position and redefine the political debate. He spoke of "cultural sovereignty," "shared sovereignty" and "neo-federalism." All these terms represented the essence of his vision of federalism. He firmly believed that the existing constitution gave the Quebec government sufficient latitude to promote the cultural distinctiveness of Quebec. With Bill 22 in 1974, he made French the official language of Quebec and this was done within a federal Canada. His notion of "shared sovereignty" clearly acknowledged the legit-

imacy and presence of the central level of government. He wanted change, wished to have formal recognition of the Quebec difference within the

Constitution and was ready to redefine the division of powers. Hence the definition of neo-federalism. Still, he never questioned the importance of the central government and its need to have real power, provided provincial jurisdictions were respected.

One must admit that these linguistic gymnastics could be exasperating to the unconditional federalist camp both in and out of Quebec. Yet it was obvious to Bourassa that for a federalist party to win a provincial election in Quebec, the appeal could not be limited solely to the unconditional federalists. The Quebec electorate is complex and an appeal must be made to nationalist voters whether they be soft federalists or soft sovereignists. Bourassa understood the attachment Quebecers have to their provincial government and its unique responsibility in defining and defending Quebec interests.

In September 1984, Brian Mulroney led his Progressive Conservative Party to a majority government victory, indeed a landslide of 211 seats, including 58 of 75 from Quebec. A major plank in his electoral platform was to bring Quebec to sign the 1982 Constitution, which had excluded Quebec, with "honour and enthusiasm." With Bourassa reaching power in late 1985, Mulroney saw the opportunity to make good on his election promise.

The process began in early 1986 with the Mont-Gabriel speech by Gil Rémillard, Bourassa's intergovernmental affairs minister, laying out Quebec's five conditions for signing the 1982



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Robert Bourassa in a familiar position near the end of his fourth term in office in 1993 — at the microphone in the Salon Rouge of Quebec's National Assembly.

Constitution, and was followed by the Edmonton Declaration at the summer premiers' conference accepting the idea of a Quebec Round. By the spring of 1987, all first ministers had agreed to the Meech Lake Accord. This was a significant achievement, with the Ontario premier of the day, David Peterson, playing a pivotal role. The Accord had to be ratified by all the legislatures and a three-year deadline was imposed by the 1982 *Constitution Act*.

Unhappily, the rest is history. Meech failed to obtain the final unanimous ratification, with Manitoba and Newfoundland holding out in a sui-

cide pact between premiers Gary Filmon and Clyde Wells. Quebec was plunged into a constitutional crisis as the support for sovereignty rose to over 60 percent. Bourassa actually came out stronger from the process because of his moderation. Quebecers would look to him for direction. He could be trusted.

It would have been easy for Bourassa to ride the crest of the sovereignty wave. His prudence and moderation, coupled with his pragmatism and realism, made him a reassuring figure to those nervous about sovereignty. Many waited and hoped for his

shift to sovereignty, including the opposition PQ.

Bourassa chose instead to give federalism another try. With the help of the newly elected Ontario premier, Bob Rae, a new process had begun without the formal participation of the Quebec government. The Quebec position was to wait for a new offer from the rest of Canada through the federal government.

It should be noted that the way Meech was defeated made it difficult, if downright impossible, for Bourassa to act as if the events leading to its

demise were to be treated as “business as usual.” The day the Meech Lake Accord was defeated, Bourassa had rallied the National Assembly and the Quebec population by declaring Quebec was and will always be a distinct society irrespective of its political choice. His approval ratings coincided with the backlash support for sovereignty.

For the next two years, the country was mobilized around the national unity crisis. By the fall of 1992, the Charlottetown Accord was negotiated, and it was presented to the Canadian population in a nationwide referendum in October 1992. Five provinces including Quebec rejected the Accord, which had recognized Quebec as a distinct society. There was to be no constitutional agreement.

When he left politics, Bourassa believed that he had made some progress for Quebec within Canada and, in times of great risk, had kept the country together. An immigration agreement was signed with the federal government in the aftermath of the Meech Lake debacle, giving Quebec increased authority in selecting and integrating immigrants, not a small feat. Despite the two setbacks (Meech and Charlottetown), he still favoured the federalist option and was active for the “No” side in the 1995 referendum on sovereignty. My last conversations with him led me to believe that his commitment to keeping Quebec within Canada had not wavered, in spite of the disappointing results for constitutional change.

If there is any criticism to be levelled at Robert Bourassa, it may have been a lack of understanding of the undercurrents affecting Canadian political life. He invested much time and energy in personal relationships with fellow premiers but he underesti-

mated the changes that had taken place since the early 1960s.

The appetite for constitutional issues had decreased, the continual threats by Quebec to leave the federation provoked a backlash in the rest of Canada, and the Trudeau vision, which included official bilingualism, multiculturalism and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, represented where Canada was at the time of Meech and Charlottetown.

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the 1960s and the 1970s; they now wanted a say. Canadians generally accepted the recognition of minority rights for French-speaking and English-speaking minorities but bought into Trudeau’s argument that the concept of the “distinct society” represented ultimately a threat to Quebec’s English-speaking minority.

Fourteen years in power, in an era of great and often tumultuous transformation, the Bourassa years can be

characterized as a period of durable reforms. That is, reforms that have passed the test of time.

Bourassa always believed that real independence for Quebec was its economic strength. While he adhered to Canadian federalism as a form of political association best suited for Quebec’s progress, his priority remained economic development, wealth creation and jobs. The development of hydroelectric power as the best form of energy over the nuclear option was his trademark. No one today questions the wisdom and the vision of the development of James Bay hydroelectric power.

Again on the economic front, he was the leader among provincial premiers in supporting North American free trade and played a pivotal role in assisting the Mulroney government’s negotiations with the United States and later with Mexico. His agreement with the federal government regarding value-added-tax reform, the GST, was part of an overall streamlining of our economy as we prepared for the implementation of FTA and NAFTA. It was not popular but he believed it served Quebec’s economic interests.

Bourassa also foresaw the rapid technological change beginning to emerge in the 1980s. Quebec under his direction was ready to meet the challenges and the opportunities associated with technology and innovation. Development of Quebec’s hydroelectric potential, free trade and adaptation to technological change became the cornerstones in modernizing Quebec’s economy.

On the social level, Bourassa always believed that the primary by-product of a strong economy was the capacity to distribute wealth and to act to promote social justice. He

considered social stability an important component in pursuing his economic agenda and consequently invested much energy in creating the conditions for social harmony. Important social reforms took place under his stewardship including health insurance (medicare), legal aid,

is a reference and the model for all Quebec premiers.

This does not mean that a federalist Quebec premier like Bourassa is less a Canadian than his counterparts in other provinces. It indicates that a Quebec premier has a special responsibility leading the only francophone

Quebecers care about Canada but are not obsessed with understanding it. Sometimes, they confuse the voice of some in English Canada with the voice of all. Bourassa occasionally failed to make the distinctions between what central Canada thought best and what the rest of Canada wanted.

**Robert Bourassa will go down in history as one of Quebec's great premiers. His years in power were not without flaws and failures, but in the final analysis he represented faithfully his fellow citizens and he believed that Quebec could progress better within Canada. He was a democrat and a man of stature in an era of transformation. When one wants to understand how Quebec politics was conducted then and is conducted today, one can learn from studying the life and character of this unique man. From this perspective alone, it is worthwhile remembering Robert Bourassa.**

consumer protection legislation, the Council on the Status of Women, Quebec's Immigration Ministry, the Ministry of Environment, the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms, reorganization of social services and the reform of Quebec's civil law code, to mention the principal achievements.

In the linguistic and cultural domain, as indicated earlier, Bourassa passed legislation proclaiming French the official language of Quebec. Following his four mandates as premier, it can be said that he was able to develop a social balance and consensus where Quebecers feel a reasonable degree of cultural security and the minorities have the recognition of their rights and institutions. While issues affecting language and culture can render this consensus fragile at any moment, Bourassa was the first to attempt to find a durable solution.

Since his departure in 1994, the linguistic consensus he helped forge seems to be holding firm.

**R**obert Bourassa was first and foremost a Quebec politician. He always considered his primary role was to defend Quebec interests. While a federalist, he never hesitated to put Quebec interests first. In this sense, he

majority society in North America. With current demographic trends, one cannot expect a different approach from any successor.

In assessing Bourassa's record, it is clear that he considered his contribution to advancing Quebec more important than his success at the federal level. He would have cherished a constitutional deal with the rest of Canada but he was mostly proud of the progress of Quebec's economy, its labour force and its social fabric. Quebecers expected no less from his governance.

At the outset, I indicated that Robert Bourassa was a mirror of Quebec. Quebecers are pragmatic, prudent and moderate as was Bourassa. Quebecers may occasionally flirt with other political options but ultimately prefer a flexible and open federalism, just as Bourassa wished. Renewed federalism remains consistently the preferred choice in poll after poll. Robert Bourassa embodied this option.

Quebecers also expect their premier to consider defending Quebec interests as his priority. Here, Bourassa made it his duty. They hope and expect change but, above all, want their difference to be respected. Bourassa always conducted his politics with this in mind.

Undoubtedly, Quebec continues to be a major factor in the conduct of federal politics. In the last federal election campaign, Prime Minister Stephen Harper was able to make gains in Quebec because he began to grasp how politics in Quebec was conducted. His Quebec lieutenant, Lawrence Cannon, was a close collaborator of Robert Bourassa in both his terms

in office and was a solid adviser in this regard. The current Liberal leadership race has shown how important a role Quebec plays in the political dynamic of Canada. Even the NDP, with tepid support in Quebec, held its national convention in Quebec City last month in the hope of making a breakthrough in Quebec.

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