Separatism

‘Separatism’ may generally be understood as the desire to establish a politically independent Quebec. This desire to break away from Canada and create a separate state is a contemporary phenomenon, born of the waves of social and political change that swept through Quebec in the 1950s and 1960s. The separatist threat has been the catalyst for Canada's constitutional debates and it is ironic that the *Constitution Act, 1982* did not accommodate any of Quebec's traditional constitutional demands.

Throughout its history, ‘separatism’ has been chameleon-like. For some of its proponents it has meant outright independence, the severing of all ties with Canada. Others have equated it with sovereignty-association (see partnership), political sovereignty plus the maintenance of an ongoing economic association with Canada. Some of its champions, such as the Parti Québécois (PQ), have vacillated between these interpretations of separatism over the years.

In the mid-1960s ‘separatism’ was confined to the fringes of Quebec politics. While revolutionary organizations, like the Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ), bombed their way onto the evening news, separatist political parties, such as Le Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale (RIN), fared poorly in provincial electoral politics. In the 1966 provincial election, the RIN could only persuade 5.4 percent of voters to endorse its independence platform.

Separatist prospects brightened with the 1968 birth of the Parti Québécois (PQ) under René Lévesque's leadership. But the growing public support for Lévesque's party, culminating in the PQ's stunning electoral victory in 1976, was realized by diluting the separatist message. First, Lévesque introduced the idea of sovereignty-association, an idea that appealed to those who were anxious about the possible negative economic consequences that could accompany independence. Then, the PQ promised not to pursue sovereignty-association unless the public endorsed that option in a referendum. Public opinion polls suggest that support for all forms of separatism is generally higher now than it was in the late 1960s. Canada’s recent history demonstrates that the language issue, specifically the status of French in Quebec, is an important fuel for ‘separatism’.

Sources:

- K. McRoberts, *Quebec: Social Change and Political Crisis* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988).
- R.A. Young, *The Secession of Quebec and the Future of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995).