

Let's Talk: **A Conversation about** **Canada and Quebec**

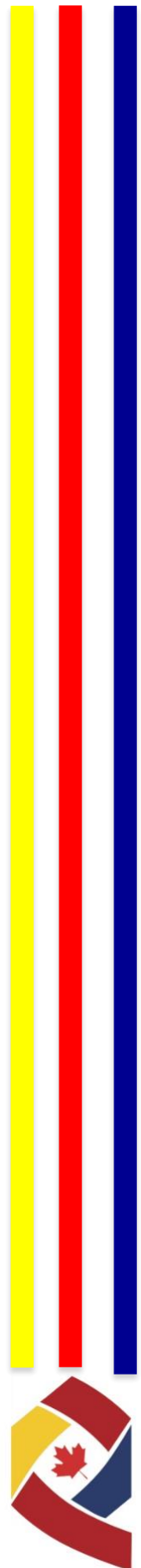


Merits and Drawbacks of **Constitutional Reform**

Peter Russell
University of Toronto

Institute of Intergovernmental Relations
School of Policy Studies, Queen's University

Quebec 2017 Paper - 1



Seeking formal Constitutional change at this time— i.e., amendment of the Constitution Acts – would be a big mistake. I am sure the government of Quebec realizes this and that is why its message in *Quebecers our way of being Canadian* downplays that kind of change in the near future and does not call for an immediate return to the constitutional negotiating table. I applaud that sensible approach but the negative reaction *Quebecers our way of being Canadian* provoked so quickly from media gurus and governments showed how much opposition there is outside Quebec to formal constitutional negotiations. That negative reaction was based on either deliberately distorting the Government of Quebec’s message or simply not reading it carefully. But I think it would be wise for Quebec to de-emphasize its interest in returning to constitutional negotiations soon.

It is difficult to promote the conversation Quebec’s government wishes to foster with Canada outside Quebec. *Quebecers our way of being Canadian* is a good news story, but the print and broadcast mass media in democracies focus on bad news – conflicts, screw-ups, scandals. No fights, nothing crazy or wrong – no news! I think targeting civil society groups is an excellent strategy. That is where conversation might take place, as I am sure it will occur here today at Queen’s University.

I don’t use new forms of social media, so I don’t know whether it might serve to promote the kind of conversation the Government of Quebec is looking for. However, I must confess that I would be surprised if blogging, Facebook, or Tweeting would be of any help in fostering real conversation – the respectful and thoughtful exchange of ideas – about Quebec and its place in today’s Canada.

I would like to share with you my experience in giving talks to groups all over the country about my recently published book, *Canada’s Odyssey: A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests*. The book traces the relationship between what I consider to be Canada’s three foundational pillars: Aboriginal Canada, French Canada, and English-speaking Canada. It shows how once English-speaking Canada became the largest and most powerful pillar, its ambition through most of Canada’s history was to get rid of the two smaller pillars by constitutional and administrative means. This policy of assimilation only served to strengthen a sense of national identity among Aboriginal peoples and the Francophone population of Quebec. My account of Canada’s odyssey concludes with the hopeful observation that now in the 21st century, English-speaking Canada, at the elite level, has come to accept Aboriginal and the Quebecois as “nations within”, making Canada the world’s leading multinational, multicultural country.

While many English-speaking Canadians are comfortable – and indeed are very positive – in thinking about Canada as multicultural and are accepting of diversity as a key element of Canadian identity, I find that many have difficulty accepting the idea that Canada is a multinational country. They seem to choke on the idea that there can be “nations within” a nation-state like Canada. Some have difficulty supporting nation-to-nation relations and treaties with Indigenous peoples. They also have trouble agreeing with the Harper Government’s 2007 recognition of the Québécois as a nation. Going beyond that to recognize the Province of Quebec as a nation within Canada is bound to be a tougher sell. Given the psychological resistance to multinationalism in English-speaking Canada, it makes sense to work at developing support for the idea that the Province of Quebec should be recognized as a nation within Canada through conversation and dialogue at the level of civil society over a number of years.

In making the case for such recognition, it will be important to be able to say that this idea has popular support among Aboriginal peoples in Quebec, within Quebec’s Anglophone minority, and among the Canadian Francophonie outside Quebec. The important news in the Quebec Government’s invitation to

dialogue with Canadians is the vision of Quebec as a jurisdiction that is not just the homeland of French Canada but a nation within Canada that cherishes its deep diversity. The authenticity of that “pitch” will be enhanced by showing that such a view of the province extends beyond the Province’s Francophone majority.

The other point I want to share with you that comes out of my numerous book talks is that the questions and comments in the question and answer period are always primarily – sometimes solely – about relations with Indigenous peoples. English-speaking Canada right now seems to be fixated on improving relations with Indigenous peoples. Try as I do to arouse interest in past relations with French Canada and Quebec, and the current effort of the Quebec Government to promote a dialogue about *Quebecers our way of being Canadian*, there is virtually no take-up. If Quebec could publicize some important break-through in improving relations with Aboriginal peoples in Quebec, that might stimulate more interest in English Canada.

Finally, allow me to make my pitch for a project Quebec could undertake that would attract a good deal of interest in the rest of Canada. This is a proposal that I and a group of scholars, representatives of federal political parties, and senior government officials have been pushing for the last six years: the “codification” of important parts of the “unwritten constitution” in an accessible, online manual. The constitutional rules that make parliamentary government democratic are all “unwritten conventions.” The formation of government after elections, the role of the Crown, the “caretaker” limits on government initiatives during an election period, the powers of the prime minister, and the structure and role of the cabinet are among the many aspects of governance governed by the informal, “unwritten” part of the constitution.

New Zealand and the United Kingdom have published and maintain online Cabinet Manuals that set these unwritten practices and principles in a succinct, clear way. Senior officials in both the Harper and Trudeau PMOs have expressed interest in producing such a Manual at the federal level. So far, however, the necessary approval of the Prime Minister has not been forthcoming. I hope that Quebec might take up this project for its own parliamentary democracy. By doing so, it would lead the country in modernizing parliamentary government and reducing the constitutional illiteracy of Canadians.