

# **Why So Much Opposition to Social Policy Change in Quebec?**

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## Why So Much Opposition to Social Policy Change in Quebec?

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Why have the Charest government's efforts to revamp Quebec's welfare state provoked such intense passion and social tensions. The government's project does, of course, deal with hot button issues such as health care, child care and labour relations. Yet, opponents of the Liberal government go beyond those issues, to accuse it of threatening the whole of Quebec as a society, that is, as an "imagined community." If in France, the right-wing Raffarin government is simply charged with "breaking up the welfare state"<sup>1</sup> when it puts similar reforms on the table, here the Charest government is indicted for "demolishing Quebec." Why such different perceptions? Why, in their opposition and debate, do so many Quebecers make no distinction between the welfare state and the national state?

### When Effects Become the Cause

In Quebec, nationalism and the national question were the foundation stones for building a modern social policy in the early 1960s. Probably more here than anywhere else, there is a clear historical link between the development of the welfare state and the building of an identity for Quebecers distinct from that of "French-Canadians" or simply "Canadians." Forty-five years after the start of the Quiet Revolution, however, the logic of causality is reversed. From being a product of identity politics, the welfare state now shapes the contours of that identity politics.

As a result, Quebec's social policies have done much more than generate "special interests" who seek to maintain the status quo and protect their benefits and positions. Their effects go well beyond the creation of groups that derive material gains, directly or not, from any particular policy. They are also the very foundation of collective identity. In other words – and in obvious opposition to what the current government seems to believe – support for the welfare state in Quebec is not only about protecting group interests. It is even more about national identity, an identity that is as much the product of social policies as are interests.

It is precisely because of this close link between social policy and national identity that public debate since the fall of 2003 has linked discussions of reengineering the state and reform of the welfare state to the national question. In these heated debates, street-level mobilizations, and illegal strikes, dismantling the welfare state is seen, rightly or wrongly, as an attack on Quebecers' collective identity. Destroying institutions that contributed to making Quebec

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Michel Husson, *Les casseurs de l'État social. Des retraites à la Sécu : la grande démolition*. Paris: La Découverte, 2003.

“different” (union rights, universal childcare, and so on) has become synonymous with the intention of reducing Quebec to a province like the others within North America.

## **The Politics of National Identity: From One Terrain to Another**

While the link between social policies and national identity is a product of history, this reading of the situation right now is reinforced by space left to the *Parti Québécois* in opposition. It is currently able to monopolize the “patriotic terrain.” This is the terrain in which there has been, for more than 40 years, a shared perception that Quebec must have space for autonomy in order to be able to act independently, so as to ensure the development, protection and autonomy of Quebec society.

For more than 40 years, this patriotic terrain has always housed at least two political options: the quest for a distinct status within Canada and the sovereignty option. Currently, however, this political terrain is undergoing major reconfiguration. In the discourse and program of the Liberal Party of Quebec the option of a distinct status within Canada has been replaced with inter-provincialism.

Closing the door on 40 years of failed constitutional negotiations, as Prime Minister Charest has promised both Quebeckers and his fellow premiers, has meant that another door has been forced open. Identity claims and identity politics, which traditionally were expressed primarily on the terrain of constitutional reform, have been transferred to the social terrain. This is the novelty of the current situation.

## **Why are Social Politics and Identity Politics Linked Now?**

This is, of course, not the first time that the Quebec Liberals have proposed radical reforms of the state. Indeed, a 1985 policy document (*The Gobeil Report*) was as ambitious as the present government’s project to re-engineer the state. The difference is that even if in the late 1980s Prime Minister Bourassa gave the impression of wanting to take on the welfare state, at the very same time he was actively engaged promoting a constitutional position that would have recognized Quebec’s special status within federalism. In a context in which the “patriotic terrain” and social policies were managed separately, it was more difficult to accuse Robert Bourassa and his government of being engaged in an effort to “demolish Quebec.” His government occupied considerable space at the time in the patriotic terrain as a promoter and defender of Quebec’s constitutional claims. The joined-up politics of 2003 and 2004 did not appear, then.

Faced with a long history of constitutional failures, in combination with the federal government’s hard line since 1995, Jean Charest’s Liberals seem to have given up on the option of special status. While the Liberals clearly have the right to restructure the post-1960 patriotic terrain in this way if they wish, the government must face up to the fact that, in so doing, its re-engineering project and its proposals to reform social policy can be expected to crystallize a passionate and nationalist – both “soft” and “hard” – opposition.