

Moving Beyond — **Entrenched Positions**

The Dialogue for a Pluralistic and Unified Quebec

by Jessie Sutherland

Understanding that behind every rigid position lies a hurt and legitimate need is one of the keys to becoming an ally to all human beings. Sustainable peace requires making a commitment to listen to this hurt and address the legitimate needs of every group, regardless of political positions. As people feel increasingly supported and understood, their thinking tends to become less rigid, dialogue becomes possible, understanding grows and creative solutions are explored. Applying this theory, a group of students organised a dialogue forum for a pluralistic and unified Quebec at a time when political tensions were high and trust was low.

In 1995, Quebec held a referendum aimed at determining whether to begin a concrete process towards sovereignty or remain within the Canada federation. Leading up to the referendum, little genuine debate and open dialogue between opposing positions could be noted. The general atmosphere was reactive as politicians generally spoke rhetorically and people clung to their rigid positions, stereotypes and false perceptions. It was not uncommon to hear that a vote for sovereignty displayed at best ethnocentricity and at worst fascism. Similarly, a vote against Quebec independence was sometimes perceived as reflective of anti-Francophone sentiment, even racism.

On referendum night, these loaded and misguided perceptions culminated, as a virtual stalemate emerged from a vote narrowly won by opponents of sovereignty. Premier Jacques Parizeau (leader of the Parti Québécois and sovereignty advocate) blamed “money” and the “ethnic vote” for their defeat. Quebec appeared more divided than ever.

In truth, there are progressive visionaries on all sides of the independence debate. Yet, in the immediate post-referendum period, their efforts to build a commonly desired society appeared fragmented. Perceiving this stalemate as reflecting an urgent need and aperture for change, students in my “Anti-Racism and Education” class at *Concordia University* (predominantly Anglophone and federalist) decided to take our first step forward by organising a “Dialogue for a Pluralistic and Unified Quebec”.

Five fundamental objectives underlay the dialogue:

1. Create a forum without political rhetoric
2. Have a dialogue, not a debate
3. Identify and understand our differences
4. Discover what we have in common
5. Create a vision of diversity with dignity

Setting out to elicit the experience of a diverse group of people and opinion, we contacted students from *UQAM* (*Université du Québec à Montréal* – predominantly Francophone and sovereigntist) and formed an organising committee together. Carefully recruiting participants, we were especially concerned with bringing in those who were and felt excluded from the referendum debate. Montreal’s cultural diversity was reflected as were traditional Anglophone and Francophone groups. Half the group had voted in favour of sovereignty, the other half had voted against.

In an emotionally charged atmosphere characterised by little trust, we were determined to foster a sense of safety that could allow participants to consider new viewpoints and move beyond entrenched ones. Hours were spent getting to know each other, generating a sense of support and understanding. Throughout the dialogue process itself, we aimed to build bridges of understanding and dialogue that stretched beyond habitual patterns of interaction. As English is generally the common public language between Francophones and Anglophones, the group agreed to conduct the dialogue in French, with English translation as needed.

Opening questions designed to address key issues while avoiding common rhetoric included: What are you proud of with respect to your heritage? What do you love about living in Quebec? What is difficult about living in Quebec?

In response, people expressed their love of the Québécois language and culture, and appreciation of Québécois patience (highlighted by a willingness to hear everything twice resulting from translation). At the same time, all participants described having experienced discrimination at one time or another.

Workshop participants discussed roots of societal division and shared personal anecdotes illustrating both the...

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