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### **Political Resurrection in Quebec: The Re-election of Robert Bourassa as Liberal Leader**

In one of the most spectacular comebacks in Canadian political history, Robert Bourassa, who had quit the leadership of the Quebec Liberal Party in 1976, discredited and rejected, was once more chosen leader by a large majority at a party convention in October, 1983. Mr. Bourassa received the support of approximately seventy-five per cent of the delegates, the remainder of the vote being almost equally divided between two other candidates.<sup>1</sup> His popularity with the delegates also extended to a majority of party supporters: a poll taken at the time showed that he had the backing of sixty-two per cent of those who intended to vote Liberal in the next election, while forty-five per cent of all Quebec voters would have supported him.<sup>2</sup> Two months later the Liberal party's standing at the polls had risen to sixty-seven per cent compared to twenty-seven per cent for the Parti Québécois.<sup>3</sup>

The story of the political demise and subsequent resurrection of Robert Bourassa will not only tell us something about political power, how it can be won, and how it can be lost, but also throws light on two others aspects of politics: the way in which changing economic and political circumstances can call for a different type of qualifications needed in a leader at different times; and finally, the special problems of leadership in a party which is essentially a coalition of divergent economic and social groups whose interests are often in conflict.

The surprising nature of Mr. Bourassa's comeback can only be fully appreciated if we look at the disrepute into which his government had fallen in the last two years before the electoral defeat of 1976. The main criticisms of the Bourassa regime, which had been in office since 1970, were poor administrative management and a lack of coherence and coordination in the planning and implementation of policies, a failure to take prompt action on some urgent major problems, a complacent attitude towards political scandals involving Liberal members of the

National Assembly, and an extensive patronage system which benefited friends of the party.<sup>4</sup>

The James Bay hydro-electric development, an imaginative project in itself, was faced by soaring and uncontrollable costs, questionable deals with certain trade unions to insure industrial peace on the work site, and political favouritism in handing out contracts. Many other situations were left to deteriorate before the government decided to intervene. It went along with Mayor Jean Drapeau's grandiose plans for the Montreal Olympics without keeping a proper check on expenditures until the financial situation became such that the Quebec government had to take over. Always seeking to find a consensus on certain controversial issues such as, measures to protect the predominance of the French language, or the settlement of labour disputes in the public sector, the Liberal leader put forward compromise solutions which usually met with the opposition of both sides in the dispute.<sup>5</sup>

Although Bourassa put great time and effort into the creation of a favourable public image, he was perceived by many of the voters as a weak and vacillating leader unable to make hard decisions. He was generally unpopular with members of the news media who considered him evasive, lacking in a spirit of openness in discussing government policies, and sometimes guilty of making misleading statements.<sup>6</sup>

The Liberal leader's final mistake was to call an election against the advice of his closest advisers two years before the government's maximum five-year term of office had expired. The party was not organizationally or financially prepared, there were serious dissensions between different factions, and the dissatisfaction with Bourassa was such that some candidates attempted to disassociate themselves from their leader.<sup>7</sup> The result was a victory for the Parti Québécois and a political disaster for the Liberals who lost seventy-six of the 102 seats they had won in 1973, and saw their popular vote drop to thirty-four per cent, the lowest for the party in a hundred years.<sup>8</sup> Bourassa was defeated in his own riding, and around ten days later resigned as leader. There were few who mourned his departure and many who were glad to see him go.

While the weaknesses and shortcomings of the Bourassa government were only too clear in 1976, some of the more positive achievements of that regime in its earlier years should not be overlooked. The economic policies it pursued must receive some credit for the general prosperity which prevailed until at least 1974.<sup>9</sup> This was a period of steadily rising wages and salaries, little increase in taxation, a sound budgetary situation, and relatively low unemployment. Between 1971 and 1975 the unemployment rate fluctuated between 6.6 and 8.1 per

cent,<sup>10</sup> comparing favourably with the roughly thirteen to fifteen per cent of recent years.<sup>11</sup>

The Bourassa government also had an impressive record of social and judicial reform:<sup>12</sup> it introduced medicare and undertook a massive re-organization of the health and welfare system which made it one of the most advanced on the continent; a system of legal aid made justice more accessible to the poor; an Office of Consumer Protection was established; a Human Rights and Freedom Charter was enacted; a Council on the Status of Women was set up and a law passed to further the formation of agricultural unions. The government's most outstanding achievement, however, in spite of the scandals and excessive spending involved, was the James Bay hydro-electric development. The decision to go ahead with this project was made at a time when the world oil crisis was forcing western countries to seek alternative sources of energy. Despite this, it was strongly opposed by the Parti Québécois, which called it a "white elephant."<sup>13</sup>

Robert Bourassa's rehabilitation and long journey back to power was above all due to hard work, tenacity and a relentless determination to achieve his goal, combined with a willingness to profit from past mistakes<sup>14</sup> and a serious intellectual effort to acquire a better understanding of the province's economic and social problems. Equally important for his political comeback were certain developments in the early eighties, to be discussed later, which made the political climate receptive to his bid for power.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after the 1976 defeat Bourassa, an economist by profession, went to Europe for further studies and lecturing. He attended the Institut des Affaires Européennes in Brussels, and was Visiting Professor at the Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires at Fontainebleau, near Paris. This European "sabbatical" was a valuable experience as part of his preparation for a return to politics. He studied the functioning of the European Common Market and was able to compare it with René Lévesque's proposal for Sovereignty-Association. He observed at first hand the way in which European governments handled certain economic and fiscal problems, and saw how the Belgians dealt with their own linguistic problem between the Walloons and the Flemish.

On his return from abroad Bourassa quietly tested the political waters once more by attending the Liberal party's 1978 leadership convention. His attendance was discreet and without fanfare, for the organizers of the meeting were afraid of a hostile reaction from the delegates which would mar the proceedings. After Claude Ryan was chosen leader Bourassa offered his services to the party as the opposition critic on financial matters. Ryan was not interested, and some

months later told him that he should stay out of politics for another ten years.<sup>16</sup>

Claude Ryan's rebuff did not dissuade the former Liberal leader from his determination to return to politics, or from seizing every opportunity to keep himself in public view. One such opportunity was the Quebec government's inauguration ceremonies for the opening of La Grande dam complex of the James Bay development. The Parti Québécois, which by now had accepted "le projet du siècle" as one of its own, had not originally intended to invite Bourassa, but did so at the last minute. To the surprise of all attending, he received a bigger ovation from the workers than René Lévesque.<sup>17</sup> This relatively minor incident was a reminder to the people of Quebec that the father of this major undertaking, in which they took such pride, was the political leader they had so definitely rejected in 1976.

The most important step in Bourassa's return to party politics, "ma rampe de lancement," as he called it, was his participation in the 1980 referendum on Sovereignty-Association. Claude Ryan, who headed a coalition of Quebec parties forming the "NO" committee, may have had mixed feelings, but could hardly refuse the co-operation of someone who was ready to accept the toughest speaking assignments before hostile audiences. Bourassa was involved in public debates with such formidable opponents as Finance Minister, Jacques Parizeau, and Pierre Bourgault, the fiery advocate of complete independence for Quebec. He was one of the few Liberals who could get a hearing from separatist-minded students in the French Cegeps and universities. Adopting his best professorial style, he would give them a lecture on the economic hazards of René Lévesque's Sovereignty-Association proposal, and how the federal system offered Quebec more advantages than disadvantages.<sup>18</sup> A constant theme wherever he spoke was, "you cannot have an economic association without political integration."<sup>19</sup>

When the Parti Québécois called the 1981 election Bourassa expressed an interest in running as a Liberal candidate. He envisaged himself in the role of party specialist in economic and financial matters as well as hydro-electric development. Although half a dozen or more riding associations were ready to nominate him as their candidate, his return to the National Assembly was opposed by Claude Ryan. Ryan contended that the Bourassa administration had been rejected by the electorate in 1976, and that his candidacy would mar the new image of the party which he had been trying to create.<sup>20</sup> The same sentiments were expressed by the President of the Quebec Liberal Federation.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Bourassa gave up his bid for the candidacy, although he was still ready to campaign for any candidate who asked for his help, which many did.<sup>22</sup>

In the face of this strong opposition from the party establishment, Bourassa would have been indefinitely blocked in his plans for more significant participation in party affairs, perhaps including a run for the leadership, but for two important developments in the early eighties: the unexpected defeat of the Liberal party in the 1981 election, which resulted in the resignation of Claude Ryan as leader the following year; the severe economic recession that hit Quebec about the same time, with mass unemployment, falling incomes and rising taxation, which put the Parti Québécois on the defensive as the voters turned away from constitutional and nationalistic concerns to preoccupation with their economic problems.

From the time he was elected leader in 1978 Claude Ryan had devoted all his energies to reforming the Quebec Liberal party and providing it with a more favourable public image. He introduced important changes in the structures of the party to make it function more democratically, and turned it into a mass party financed by its dues-paying members. In spite of these substantial accomplishments he had never achieved a high level of personal popularity, either within the party, or with the general electorate. His leadership was largely unchallenged, however, until the Liberals were defeated in the 1981 election. Although highly respected for his intellectual qualities, Ryan was not a very good politician and the 1981 defeat was attributed largely to his handling of the election campaign.<sup>23</sup> From that time onward his support among the membership steadily declined until he finally resigned as leader in August, 1982. A party convention held a month later decided to postpone a leadership convention for another year.

Even before Claude Ryan resigned Robert Bourassa had been actively campaigning against the Parti Québécois. All on his own, without any assistance, financial or otherwise from the party organization, he had been travelling to all parts of the province making speeches to service clubs, chambers of commerce, community organizations, or any other groups that wanted to listen to him. He had by now become a much more experienced and convincing politician than he was in the early seventies. The old ambiguities and indecision were gone, as he put forward his ideas in a straightforward and forceful manner. Armed with facts and figures, he handled the most leading questions from his audience with the ease of a university professor (which he was), who had a thorough knowledge of his material.<sup>24</sup> His self-imposed exile studying and lecturing in Europe had served him well.

As party members became more and more dissatisfied with Ryan's leadership, an increasing number of riding associations invited Bou-

rassa to address them, and invariably gave him a warm and enthusiastic welcome. At one such meeting in the Montreal area where the crowd filling the hall whistled, cheered and gave him a standing ovation, he was reported to have murmured, "it wasn't like this five years ago."<sup>25</sup> It is important to note here that this enthusiasm for Bourassa among the membership of these constituency associations was not necessarily shared by their deputies in the National Assembly. At the time, most Liberal members of the Assembly, even those unhappy with Ryan's leadership, were strongly hostile towards Bourassa.

The growing popularity of Bourassa with the Liberal rank and file was due not only to the widespread sentiment, "we cannot win with Ryan," but also to the type of political message he was delivering wherever he went. While the Parti Québécois was absorbed in its constitutional quarrel with the Ottawa government, or debating such questions as to whether independence would be the main issue in the next election, Bourassa was addressing himself to Quebec's economic problems. Avoiding wherever possible controversial language and constitutional problems, he focussed his attacks on the economic policies of the Parti Québécois and the way in which it was handling the problems of the recession. He also put emphasis on the adverse economic effects which would result from Quebec's separation from Canada, and the difficulty of a solid recovery as long as private capital was reluctant to invest in the province until the issue of independence had been settled.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the proposals put forward by Bourassa for revival of the economy and reduction of unemployment were: a massive expansion of the James Bay hydro-electric development coupled with a vigorous campaign to sell surplus power to the New England states; a policy of encouragement to private enterprise to establish high technology industries in the province; aggressive promotion of the tourist industry and a drive to substantially increase Quebec's exports; tax relief in the form of eliminating or reducing certain taxes to stimulate investment, and the complete abolition of succession duties.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the Liberal leader's ideas for recovery may be debatable,<sup>28</sup> but the main point is that ever since the recession began he was one of the few politicians, in either the Parti Québécois or Liberal party, who consistently concentrated on the issues which public opinion polls in recent years have shown to be the main preoccupation of most voters: economic problems such as, unemployment, the cost of living, high taxes, falling incomes and the energy crisis.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of his political campaigning from 1981 onward, Robert Bourassa never openly admitted that he was interested in regaining the

leadership. When questioned by reporters on his subject is usual answer was, "I am available if the party wants me." It had become apparent, however, by the time that Claude Ryan indicated he might retire that Bourassa was not only interested in more active participation in the party, but in the leadership itself. It was also clear that certain elements within the party would do everything possible to block his comeback.

The deadline for nominations for the leadership race of 1983 was August 31, one and a half months before the opening of the party convention in October. Aside from Bourassa, there were two other candidates: Daniel Johnson, elder son of the former Union Nationale leader of the same name, and member of the National Assembly from a constituency in the Montreal area; and Pierre Paradis, a young lawyer who was member of the Assembly for a riding in the Eastern Townships.

All candidates had started their campaigning several months before the official nomination date. When it became evident that Bourassa had a head start and a good chance of winning the leadership race, he immediately found himself faced with strong opposition from three different groups: the Quebec wing of the federal Liberal party, which had been antagonized by the nationalistic stance he had adopted on certain issues during the seventies; the remaining followers of Claude Ryan, "the Ryanists," who were afraid of a rerun of the worst features of the first Bourassa administration; the English-speaking membership of the party, who had never forgiven the former leader for introducing the language restrictions of Bill 22.

The opposition was to fail in its attempt to stem the Bourassa tide. The federal Liberals tried at first to block him by trying to persuade Raymond Garneau, former Minister of Finance in Bourassa's cabinet to run against him.<sup>30</sup> When Garneau, after considerable hesitation, finally decided not to enter the contest, they were forced to resign themselves to the situation. The Ryanists gave their support to Daniel Johnson who had been a protégé and close associate of the retiring leader. When Johnson's campaign failed to make headway, even with the strong endorsement of Claude Ryan himself,<sup>31</sup> many of the Ryanists went over to the Bourassa camp.<sup>32</sup> The English Liberals, who supported Johnson, and to some extent Paradis,<sup>33</sup> remained a solid block of opposition to the end — a minority within the province and within the membership of the party, they managed to support minority candidates in the leadership race.

The system of election for the leadership convention of 1983 was for party members in each electoral district to select twenty-four delegates, adding up to a total of 2928 if all districts elected their quota.



Each of the three leadership candidates presented to the members in each riding a slate of twenty-four delegates who were committed to support him at the convention. Although party members could split their vote between slates, in practice they usually voted for the whole slate of one candidate.

When the convention opened it was obvious that the vast majority of delegates were Bourassa supporters, although they were still free to change their minds at the last minute. Bourassa won on the first ballot with 2138 votes, compared with 353 for Paradis, and 343 for Johnson. Following the usual custom, the two defeated candidates called upon their followers to throw their support behind the new leader to make the convention's decision unanimous. The political outcast of 1976 had fought his way back to the leadership of the Quebec Liberal party for the second time.

In looking back at the various steps by which Robert Bourassa succeeded in regaining the Liberal leadership, one cannot help but note the contrast between his source of support this time around and the political forces behind his first election to the leadership in 1970. At that time he owed his election mainly to a handful of key organizers, influential politicians and fund raisers, usually referred to as "the establishment."<sup>34</sup> In the 1983 leadership race his success was due to support from the general membership in constituency associations across the province (with the notable exception of the English strongholds of west-end Montreal), while the party establishment attempted to block his political comeback.<sup>35</sup> Paradoxically, Claude Ryan's reforms of party structures to make them more democratic and increase the influence of the ordinary member in the decision-making process, facilitated the return to power of the politician to whom he was strongly opposed.

As the new leader of Quebec's Liberals takes over the party and prepares it for the next election, which will probably be held sometime in 1985, his most important task, and one which will call for considerable tact and skill, will be to strengthen and maintain its unity. While the problem of unity is common to all parties after a divisive leadership contest, it is a particularly acute one for the Quebec Liberal party because of its complex composition as a loose coalition of various economic, social and linguistic groups whose interests and viewpoints on certain issues are often in conflict. Like all such parties, compromise and consensus play an important role, and policy formation tends to follow a pragmatic approach.

The sweeping nature of Robert Bourassa's victory in the leadership race places him in a strong position to weld together all the diverse elements composing the party, and to win over the various groups who



opposed him for the leadership. His previous experience will have taught him that a strong and united Liberal party will be needed to meet the challenge of the Parti Québécois in the coming election, for although René Lévesque's party may be weakened, it can still be a formidable foe.

## NOTES

1. Convention proceedings were well covered by, *Le Soleil, La Presse, Le Devoir, Gazette*, Oct. 15, 17, 1983.
2. Sorecom poll, *Le Soleil*, 14, 15, Oct. 1983.
3. Sorecom poll, *Gazette*, 19, Dec. 1983.
4. For a description of the political scandals, patronage and other shortcomings of the Bourassa regime see, André Bernard, *Québec: élections 1976* (Montreal: Editions Hurtubise, 1976), pp. 70-5; Pierre O'Neill and Jacques Benjamin, *Les Mandarins du pouvoir* (Montreal: Editions Québec-Amérique, 1978), pp. 126-36.
5. A former Bourassa cabinet minister stated at the time, "The Liberal government was defeated because it tried to govern by consensus rather than by taking a solid stand on a number of issues." See Ray Doucet, "Liberals Wavered, Says Cournoyer," *Montreal Star*, Nov. 18, 1976.
6. The weaknesses of Robert Bourassa as a leader during his first administration are described in, Don Murray and Vera Murray, *De Bourassa à Levesque* (Montreal: Editions Quinze, 1978), pp. 172-89; O'Neill and Benjamin, *Les Mandarins du pouvoir*, pp. 146-48, 174-83; see also comments by a senior newspaperman when Bourassa was re-elected to the leadership in 1983, Claude Mason, "Lettre ouverte à Robert Bourassa," *Le Soleil*, 15 oct. 1983.
7. On party divisions see, Bernard, *Québec: élections 1976*, pp. 70-3.
8. *Annuaire du Québec*, 1979-1980, p. 103.
9. The electorate appeared to think so; in the 1973 election the Liberals won 102 out of the 110 seats, and received fifty-five per cent of the popular vote. *Annuaire du Québec*, 1974, p. 120.
10. *Annuaire du Québec*, 1979-1980, p. 474.
11. According to Statistics Canada, the unemployment rate in Quebec in July, 1983, was 13.9 per cent, down from 14.2 per cent the previous month. *Gazette*, 6 Aug. 1983.
12. See Murray and Murray, *De Bourassa à Levesque*, pp. 123-24; Julius H. Grey, "PQ's 'Good Government' Boast Not So Accurate," *Gazette*, 9 April 1981.
13. The positive and negative aspects of the Bourassa administration, 1970-1976, are analyzed in, Editorials, *Le Devoir*, 12, 20 nov. 1976.
14. Claude V. Marsolais, "Bourassa fait son autocritique," *La Presse* 20 avril 1983.
15. The various stages in Bourassa's return in the leadership are described in, Guy Deshaies, "Le Marathonien du pouvoir," *L'Actualité*, nov. 1983, 45-58, 92.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
17. *Ibid.*
18. See speech to economics students at Université de Montréal, *Gazette*, 19 March 1980.
19. For an elaboration of this argument see his address to the Association of Quebec Economists, *Montreal Star*, 27 April 1979.
20. Rodolphe Morissette, "Ryan écarte indirectement la candidature de Bourassa," *Le Devoir*, 17 sept. 1980.
21. Rodolphe Morissette, "Des élections pour mettre fin à l'imposture," *Le Devoir*, 7 juillet 1980.
22. Richard Cleroux, "Bourassa Received Plenty of Invitations but None from Ryan." *Globe and Mail*, 20 March 1981.
23. See criticism by Lawrence Wilson, President of the Quebec Liberal Party, *Le Devoir*, 15, 16, juin 1981.
24. On "the new Bourassa," see Editorial, "La longue marche . . ." *La Presse*, 17 oct. 1983; Deshaies, "Le Marathonien du pouvoir," pp. 57, 92. There are still some who question how profoundly the Liberal leader has changed. Professor Léon Dion of Laval University, once one of Bourassa's severest critics, makes the statement, "I ask the question, but can't answer

it yet." See Margot Gibb-Clark, "Bitter Critics of Bourassa Now Back Him," *Globe and Mail*, 1 Oct. 1983.

25. "Bourassa: Like Phoenix Out of the Ashes," *Gazette*, Nov. 21, 1981.
26. Rodolphe Morissette, "Bourassa: le PLP doit miser sur l'économie et non la constitution," *Le Devoir*, 16 nov. 1981; see also his speech to students at Shawinigan, Que., *Le Devoir*, 27 mars 1981.
27. See Graham Fraser, "Bourassa Plans Mega-Projects, Export Aid, Language Amendments," *Gazette*, 15 Oct. 1983; Deshaies, "Le Marathonien du pouvoir," pp. 46-7.
28. The proposal for massive expansion of hydro-electric development was criticized by the New York investment house, Prudential-Bache Securities, *Le Devoir*, 25 jan. 1984.
29. See Sorecom polls, *Gazette*, 3 Oct. 1981 and *Le Devoir*, 16, 17 sept. 1982; Segma poll, *Le Devoir*, 4, 5, 6 oct. 1983.
30. Pierre O'Neill, "Les 'fédéraux' font déjà campagne pour Garneau," *Le Devoir*, 23 juin 1983.
31. See *Le Devoir*, 3 sept. 1983.
32. *Ibid.*, 18, 24 août 1983.
33. Rodolphe Morissette, "Joan Dougherty appuie Pierre Paradis," *Le Devoir*, 6 sept. 1983.
34. See Murray and Murray, *De Bourassa à Levesque*, pp. 61-67; Richard B. Holden, *Election 1970: Le Point tournant* (Montréal: Edition Ariès, 1970), pp. 48-51.
35. The diversity of forces opposing Bourassa is described in, Editorial, "La Longue marche...." After the resignation of Claude Ryan the executive of the party association proposed at its 1982 convention (attended by the writer as observer), that the election of a new leader be put off for a year in order to find "a suitable candidate." They knew Bourassa was ready and waiting, but obviously did not believe that he qualified.