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## So What's so Scary? A Reply to Robert M. Martin

I AM SADDENED, though not terribly surprised, that Martin finds my concept of nation a bit scary. That, together with his remarks about “old stock” Quebeckers, reveals, I fear, how far even some intelligent and clear thinking English-speaking Canadian intellectuals are from understanding the realities of contemporary Quebec society. Unfortunately, Martin does not stand alone here. What needs to be firmly kept in mind, in the face of his remarks (remarks of a type that we have often heard before) is that contemporary Quebec is a liberal society. It is a liberal democracy as thoroughly committed to pluralism and tolerance as any other liberal society. Indeed in practice it is more thoroughly so with respect to its minority populations than any of the English-speaking Canadian provinces. Moreover, what makes a person a francophone Quebecker has nothing at all to do with descent—old stockishness—but with the mastery of a language, cultural attunement and participation in its public culture. Becoming such is perfectly open to everyone, anglophones and allophones alike. In wishing this attunement to be pervasive and secure in Quebec society, as sovereigntists do, there is no denigration of anglophone culture, but, for this sovereigntist, as well as many other sovereigntists, a pride and a pleasure in our being fortunate enough to have a wide cultural diversity in Montreal—something that goes far beyond just francophone and anglophone culture. It is not something we can take credit for. It is a fortunate historical contingency of our situation. But nonetheless it is our good fortune and I certainly do not reject cultures other than traditional francophone culture. Instead I rejoice in this diversity, as do most sovereigntists, as something which gives us hybrid-vigour and cultural sophistication: some-

thing which makes me happy to be in Quebec and to count myself lucky in being a Quebecker. It is simply mind-boggling that Martin does not see how deeply pluralistic our society is. He continues to reason as if we were still a priest-ridden society. Perhaps Mordecai Richler does not give us the clearest and most accurate picture of what Quebec is like.

What we do need (as does any society)—and this does not at all gainsay what I have said above—is a common comprehensive culture (a language that almost all of us understand, a political culture that we share, a constitutional structure, and a set of institutions that are common to us). A bunch of people in conditions of modernity could not even be a society without that. Without it we would simply have a tower of Babel. Nova Scotia is an English-speaking society with a French-speaking national minority. English is the *lingua franca* there, whatever fictions we may have about bilingualism. But this can obtain even while Nova Scotians recognize the full membership in the English-speaking nation of its francophone national minority. Quebec, sovereign or otherwise, does the same for its anglophone national minority. I would ask Professor Martin, or for that matter anyone else, to give us some evidence (even just a bit) to show that the government of Quebec and Quebec sovereigntists generally are privileging old stock Quebeckers. Forget about a few, thoroughly marginalized, loose cannons. Every society has some. Even Sweden has its fascists. And look instead at the reality of Quebec laws and practices: practices and laws that the *parti-Québécois* fully supports both in theory and in actual practice. It will not do to cite Jacques Parizeau's referendum night speech. "*Nous*" referred to all Quebeckers who identified with the Quebec nation. And it was indeed money and the ethnic vote which defeated the *Oui* side. If there had been no allophones in Quebec the sovereigntists would have carried the day. This is not to imply that allophones are not welcome. They are an enriching element in our complex society and we would be much the worse without them. And it certainly is not to say, or in any way even to hint, that they did not have every right to vote and, of course, to vote as they did. We sovereigntists, that time around, were defeated democratically. But it is just a fact that the ethnic vote had exactly the effect Parizeau said it had. To observe that, if the Quebec City bureaucrats had voted differently that would

also have carried the day for the sovereigntists, does not gainsay that. Parizeau's remarks most certainly should not be understood as racist, but as saying what was indeed the case, though, of course, it was not, as the Quebec City vote indicates, the whole story.

There are in the world plenty of nasty, barbarous nationalisms, but *liberal* nationalism—the nationalism of Quebec sovereigntists—isn't one of them. No one in a sovereign Quebec would be *excluded* from full membership in the Quebec nation, but to be *able* fully and effectively to participate in that society, individuals would need to have an acquaintance with and an attunement to its comprehensive culture. But no one is being excluded from that. The belief that such an exclusion would obtain is just a persistent and, I fear, a rather paranoid myth on the part of not a few anglophones and allophones. And, like all such myths, it tends to stay around no matter how badly it squares with the facts.

We in Canada—all of what is at present Canada—face difficult times, for the issue of Quebec sovereignty will not go away. Particularly in such circumstances, it behoves us to live without myths if we can. Unfortunately Professor Martin has repeated, and thereby helped to perpetuate, one of the oldest, but still an utterly discredited, English-Canadian myth about Quebec. I say to English Canadians, if we Quebeckers (some of whom are also English Canadians), by expression of our own democratic will, vote for sovereignty, accept that, freeing yourselves from such a persistent, but still an irrational, myth about us, and let us live together as cooperative and friendly neighbours in this vast and beautiful North American continent.

#### *Editorial Note*

Readers who wish to contribute to this debate, or to comment on questions raised elsewhere in this journal, are invited to do so. For details see the Editorial at the beginning of this issue.