

The OCTOBER CRISIS

Appendix F

General Contestation in Quebec Society (1960-1970)

I. Introduction - The new activists

To understand the October Crisis, 1970, one must appreciate the high level of contestation in Quebec by organized labour and by nationalist, language and separatist groups, which very often ended in violence, personal injury and property damage. It is noteworthy that part of the success of any demonstration was measured by the publicity given to the violence.

The years 1960–1970, in particular, were a period of contestation against the basic institutions in Quebec, especially against governments. The Quiet Revolution began with the Asbestos strike of 1949-50 and the legislative Quiet Revolution of Jean Lesage from 1960-66 only increased the contestation. For example, government employees were now unionised, including civil servants, policemen and firemen, who for the first time had the right to strike.

The contestation took place in three often interacting forums:

- a) Organized labour in organized strikes;
- b) Separatist, nationalist and language groups;

c) Contestations over particular issues such as the Lapalme workers, McGill français, Bill 63 and language teaching in Saint-Leonard, which events usually attracted organized and unorganized students, perennial students and student/dropouts (décrocheurs). Another distinct group was composed of young unemployed or partially employed activists, who felt disenfranchised such as the activists at the Maison des Pêcheurs in Gaspé, Paul and Jacques Rose, are an example.

II. Organized labour

1) Introduction

The Quebec labour movement has never been a united whole, either before 1970 or since. There were three large “centrales syndicales”, i.e. the unionised, very well organized, well-paid and usually well-protected workers belonging to the CSN, the CEQ and the FTQ. There were also the Union of farmers (l'U.C.C), various independent unions not members of the centrales, the giant civil servants' union and house unions. Finally there was unorganized labour, which was usually badly paid.

Quebec labour earned its wings in the Asbestos strike (1949-1950) and has since moved in two directions - conservatism and radicalisation. Conservatism, for example, in its refusal to push for a high minimum wage for unorganized labour, which refusal results in union members wishing to retain their membership in their unions, being better paid than non-union workers. Conservatism can also be seen in the union officials, who have often protected and promoted family members and friends in union administration (e.g. in

managing pension funds) and jobs in the work force (e.g. on the Montreal waterfront, where family members often have preference.) Radicalism, on the other hand, can be seen in the bombings and violence in the 1960s.

2) Political motivation and radicalization

In 1968, the labour movement became very politically motivated, going beyond its original purpose, which was to benefit its workers. Cardin put it this way:

“C’est en 1968 qu’apparaît pour la première fois la nécessité plus ou moins confuse de faire de l’action politique. De nouveaux types de regroupements populaires voient alors le jour, tels les comités ouvriers et des comités d’action politique (ou C.A.P.). Ces derniers sont notamment mis sur pied à l’initiative des permanents syndicaux, particulièrement ceux de la CSN, qui adopte officiellement, en 1968, la philosophie du deuxième front. À l’exemple de la CSN et du Conseil central de Montréal, dont ils constituent en quelque sorte une extension, les C.A.P. développent une philosophie de contestation très différente de celle des premiers comités de citoyens et qui se veut plus sociétale. À la base de l’action des permanents syndicaux et des animateurs sociaux, le rôle d’intellectuels universitaires tels Marcel Rioux, Gérard Fortin, Fernand Dumont ou Jacques Grand’Maison est important dans ce processus de radicalisation.”

(Jean-François Cardin, 1970 at p. 58).

3) The influence of Vallières and Gagnon on the labour movement

Vallières and Gagnon had a profound effect, not merely on the FLQ, but on the labour union movement, when in 1965, as radical communists, they joined the FLQ and redirected its bombing and violence towards labour union strikes and manifestations. As Jean-François Cardin would write:

“Dans cette évolution, l’année 1965 marque un tournant avec l’arrivée de Pierre Vallières et de Charles Gagnon au sein du mouvement. À partir de cette date, l’analyse se raffine, la théorie marxiste et le concept d’impérialisme sont mieux articulés. L’oppression des travailleurs et la lutte des classes deviendront les concepts dominants de l’idéologie et de la motivation du FLQ, auxquels sera désormais subordonnée à la question nationale.” (Jean-François Cardin, 1970 at p. 22).

4) The increased bombings and violence during strikes

Strikes became very violent from 1963 on, as can be seen in the long list of bombings in Gérard Pelletier (français) 1971 at pp. 225 to 233. And the police strike of 1969 became so dangerous, for example, that Jean-Jacques Bertrand, Premier of Quebec, called the Canadian Army into Quebec.

III. The Nationalist and Separatist Movement

The various “contestataires” were especially attracted to Quebec independence as a solution (as they saw it) to Quebec’s problems and joined the various nationalistic and language protests. Jean-François Cardin described it succinctly:

“Le mouvement indépendantiste mobilisera également des milliers de personnes et sera à l’origine de nombreuses démonstrations publiques dont certaines seront très violentes tels le fameux «samedi de la matraque» en 1964 et la ‘Saint-Jean’ en 1968. en 1969, qui marque un sommet rarement inégalé dans le mécontentement populaire et dans la réponse répressive des autorités... » La ferveur nationaliste se cristallise autour de la question linguistique. Ce seront les épisodes de l’Opération ‘McGill français’, de l’affaire Saint-Léonard et du bill 63.” (Jean-François Cardin, 1970 at pp. 61-62).

“Parmi les groupes qui ont eu le plus d’influence mentionnons le Mouvement de libération populaire (M.L.P.), né en juin 1965, et dont l’unique permanent n’est nul autre que Pierre Vallières, qui adhère au même moment au FLQ. En 1968, deux ans après la dissolution du M.L.P., une autre coalition des forces populaires et de gauche voit le jour, le Front de libération populaire (F.L.P.), issu de la frange socialiste radicale du défunt RIN. Le F.L.P., indépendantiste et socialiste, veut favoriser l’implantation de comités ouvriers combattifs et axe son action sur la propagande et la mise sur pied de nombreuses manifestations. C’est au sein d’organismes comme le M.L.P. et surtout le F.L.P. que militeront côte à côte des membres du FLQ et des syndicalistes de gauche.

“La radicalisation des groupes populaires à partir de 1968 est intimement liée à l’évolution du mouvement syndical, qui suit de près cette évolution. Au sein des syndicats, la politisation des relations de travail, et son corollaire inévitable, la radicalisation idéologique, qui trouvent leur source dans l’émergence, au milieu des

années 1960, d'un État-employeur à la fois juge et partie, commencent à se faire sentir dès 1966.” (Jean-François Cardin, 1970 at pp. 59-60).

IV. The students and student dropouts (décrocheurs)

Students –perennial, partial, full-time or dropouts, were particularly active in all demonstrations and by the time of the Crisis in October 1970, many were organized and experienced in violent contestations. (See Appendix “I” and the Appendix to Chapter 8, for a partial list of student groups which took part in the October Crisis.)

V. Conclusion

By the time of the October Crisis 1970, organized labour in Quebec, various nationalistic groups and student activists were poised, experienced, organized and ready to take part in a general Quebec confrontation of a violent nature.