

Robert Bourassa on the War Measures Act

**Interview of Robert Bourassa by Raymond St.-Pierre (1977)
Director of Information, CKAC radio.**

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Question: [Was the government prepared to negotiate, to make concessions?]

Answer: We were prepared to make certain concessions. For instance, already in the case of Mr. Cross we agreed to broadcast the FLQ manifesto, and we were prepared to recommend parole in the cases where we felt it was justified. On the other hand, there was never in my mind a desire to give-in on the subject of freeing the "political prisoners". In any case, there were other demands in the communiqués of the FLQ. This was not an easy dilemma for me to resolve, but it seemed to be inadmissible and intolerable to give-in on such a fundamental point. This would have meant that any one who would have wanted to be a terrorist could gain eventually their freedom thanks to another kidnapping. You only need a few people to effect a kidnapping, that's all.

[...]

In the reports that I was receiving from Robert Demers, he indicated that his meetings with Robert Lemieux were not bringing significant results. Robert Lemieux was giving press conferences where he said things that did not conform with what had been said in private meetings. This was not serious, and days were passing.

Question: Did somebody provide information regarding the extent of the threat? You have mentioned a will, there only were a few individuals involved. When requesting the War Measures Act, can one rest a decision on that? You said that some of the terrorists intended to bring down the government. Is this a sufficient reason as we did not face, after all, a coherent attempt at insurrection?

Answer: Your question is pertinent. In the first part you are right. It is not because a few individuals wish to topple the government that such radical measures are called for. However, the last part of your question affirms that there was not coherent action. That was not clear. On the contrary, it appeared to be coherent action.

I have always said that we did not expect a revolution in the streets. I say that at this point steps had been taken by individuals: a diplomat had been kidnapped, a cabinet minister had been kidnapped, they were under threats of murder. The police forces were rather tired. The fact that, after a whole week, we were unable to find those that had effected the kidnappings also was considered.

In the light of all that, and because it was the only thing to do, we took the step. We have discussed in the years since the crisis intermediary measures. In the particular of the law, there was no censorship of the press: in general, the War Measures Act could have been made even more radical. Of course, there was preventive detention. I know to what extent there is nothing more foreign to a civilised and democratic system than preventive detention. However, it remains that acts committed were extremely serious and that, after days of crisis, we were unable to resolve them. One has to admit that the action taken by the government, in that week, put an end to the political violence that had existed for seven to eight years.

Question: How do you judge the attitude of the opposition?

Answer: They were certainly in good faith. I do not think that they attempted to gain politically. May be they tried, but it is very difficult to know what may be in the back of the mind of public figures. It is evident that sometimes they fell into partisan politics. I do not think that René Lévesque, at least on the issue of

Pierre Laporte, tried to score political points. The opposition parties, by attacking my relations with the federal government, in the last seven years, have not hesitated to score points. However, that is another question!

One can always debate questions back and forth. As far as I am concerned, this issue is open for debate. I believed that we were right, I continue to think that we were right. I understand the attitude of those that believe that this law was not necessary. I respect their attitude. On the other hand, I do not at all accept that we should have negotiated the release of "political prisoners". If I had accepted the proposal of the Parti Québécois, I think I would have committed an historical mistake toward the people of Quebec.

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