

Rebel with a Cause: The rise of René Lévesque

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In 1976, the Parti Québécois won a majority in Quebec under the leadership of René Lévesque. Short of stature, balding, and with a cigarette in hand, Lévesque seemed like an unlikely personality to become premier at first glance. However, by embracing Quebec nationalism and remaining determined through times of hardship, Lévesque was able to prove himself as a politician. Through the analysis of his political career from 1960 to 1976, it becomes clear that Lévesque rose to power because of the reputation he fostered in Jean Lesage's cabinet, the decision he made to leave the Quebec Liberal Party in 1967, and the changes he made to the Parti Québécois after the 1974 election.

Even before Lévesque officially became a politician, it was clear that his reputation would play an integral role in his rise. Lévesque became interested in becoming an active participant in Quebec politics in the fall of 1959.¹ Timing was ideal for a man like Lévesque; Jean Lesage, the leader of the Liberal Party, was in the process of “gather[ing] outstanding men,”² so he could create a team of Liberals capable of defeating the Union Nationale. A French-language war correspondent for the CBC during the Korean War, Lévesque had already made a name for himself before his political debut.³ He was a front-ranking Quebec journalist, and the “people in French Canada were quite simply infatuated with him” because of his “mastery of the spoken word.”⁴ In addition, Lévesque had covered many elections and political conventions during his career, giving him insight on the inner workings of politics.⁵ After witnessing the conservative and nationalist Union Nationale dominate Quebec, Lévesque was attracted to the Liberal Party's platform of modernizing the province.⁶ Lesage recognized that Lévesque's popularity could be of benefit to his party,

¹ Jean Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, trans. David Ellis (Gage Publishing, 1975), 131.

² Marguerite Paulin, *René Lévesque: Charismatic Leader*, trans. Jonathan Kaplansky (Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 2004), 60.

³ Edward Cowan, “Leader of Quebec Separatists: Rene Levesque,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1970.

⁴ Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

and Lévesque was eager to become a key player in the Liberal's campaign.⁷

It was in Lesage's Liberal government that Lévesque proved his capabilities as a politician, building the reputation he needed to eventually become premier. Since Lévesque was a newcomer to politics and had a clean public image, Lesage assigned him the portfolio of Public Works; it had been a place of patronage under the Union Nationale, and was in need of a fresh start.⁸ However, although Lévesque's "mind was concentrating on Public Works, his heart was more concerned with hydraulic resources."⁹ A Quebec nationalist, Lévesque wanted to find ways of promoting Quebec's interests. He believed that nationalization of Hydro-Quebec was necessary in order for the province to become more economically independent.¹⁰ His objective was for Hydro-Quebec to become the sole producer and distributor of electricity in the province.¹¹ This would allow French-Canadians more opportunities to move into top managerial positions—something they had yet to experience under private ownership.¹²

The nationalization of Hydro-Quebec was one of the most important feats of Lévesque's career because it was originally not supported by the Liberals. He was largely alone in his thinking and faced a lot of opposition. Some cabinet ministers regarded Lévesque's plan as "an abuse of ministerial responsibility,"¹³ and Lesage was concerned with the financial implications of the project, which would cost upwards of 6 million dollars.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Lévesque remained determined. In an attempt to make his proposal seem more attractive, Lévesque appealed to Quebecers' pride. Rather than emphasizing the monetary benefits of nationalization, he shifted the argument, turning it into a debate on French patriotism.¹⁵ Unlike others in the Liberal Party, Lévesque realized that by the 1960s, the French public was less willing to passively accept economic inequality; the 1961 census had revealed

⁷ Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 141.

⁸ Peter Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1976), 36.

⁹ Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹¹ Paulin, *René Lévesque: Charismatic Leader*, 66.

¹² Norman Penner, "Quebec Explodes a Bombshell: René Lévesque and the Challenge of Separatism," *The Round Table* 67, no.266 (1977): 155.

¹³ Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 182.

¹⁴ Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 191.

¹⁵ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 40.

that Anglophone Montrealers were earning higher salaries than their French counterparts.¹⁶ Since the government of Quebec was under the control of French Canadians, Lévesque believed that the public should see it as the primary institution capable of looking after the provinces interests.¹⁷ He asserted that the French Canadians “shouldn’t have to apologize now for wanting their place in the sun,”¹⁸ and worked diligently to gain their support.

Although the nationalization of Hydro-Quebec had originally been met with criticism, Lévesque’s determination eventually convinced Georges-Emile Lapalme, the Attorney-General in Lesage’s Cabinet, of the plan’s value.¹⁹ At a meeting at Lac-à-l’Epaule in 1962, Lapalme persuaded Lesage to listen to Lévesque. Two affirmative decisions were made: Hydro-Quebec would be nationalized, and an election would be called as soon as possible.²⁰ When the news of the two decisions broke two weeks later, many were taken by surprise. Not only had Lévesque convinced the premier of his idea, but the Liberals made the plan the focal point of their upcoming election platform.²¹ Throughout the spring and summer of 1962, Lévesque took his case to the public, once again appealing to a sense of French-Canadian pride to make his argument.²² His campaigning worked; the Liberals won more ridings in the election of 1962 than they had during the election of 1960. By May of 1963, Hydro-Quebec took possession of power companies covered by the nationalization scheme, and Lévesque rejoiced.²³

Considered the “most ambitious economic decision ever taken by a Quebec government,”²⁴ Lévesque’s victory proved his political acumen. Not only had he survived his first serious challenge as a politician—he had thrived. After only a couple years in politics, Lévesque had managed to single-handedly convince the Liberals of his plan, earning him a reputation as a daring politician.²⁵ In addition,

¹⁶ Ibid, 35.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 189.

¹⁹ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 48.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Graham Fraser, *René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 28.

²² Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 39.

²³ Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 191.

²⁴ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 33.

²⁵ Ibid, 31.

Lévesque had proven his commitment to Quebec nationalism. Considered the “bright star of Quebec nationalism in the Lesage constellation,”²⁶ separatists in the province began to view Lévesque as a potential leader for their cause. The respect Lévesque achieved during his first couple of years as a Liberal was crucial to his success; the sentiment of the public at the time was that Lévesque could go wherever he wanted to in Canadian politics.²⁷ Lévesque had an image that would benefit him in the next significant decision of his career: what to do when the Liberals fell out of power.

The election of 1966 was significant for Lévesque for a multitude of reasons. After the nationalization of Hydro-Quebec, Lesage’s Liberals had continued to implement great change in the province: the state was strengthened, the public service was reorganized, the education system was reformed, and a foundation was laid for new social and cultural policies.²⁸ However, by 1966, the public began to become concerned with the direction of the “Quiet Revolution,” and many believed that Lesage had become overconfident in his position as premier.²⁹ These sentiments resulted in the Liberals losing the election, leaving the party fractured and wanting to find people to blame for their failure.³⁰ For Lévesque, the importance of the election was not only because of the result, but because of the reason for the defeat. Although they only received 9% of the vote and won no seats, the two existing separatist parties, the Rassemblement pour l’Indépendance Nationale (R.I.N.) and the Ralliement National (R.N.) had shown strength in certain constituencies, contributing to the Liberals’ loss.³¹ Even when he was a Lesage Liberal, Lévesque had shown separatist tendencies. In 1963, he told the *Financial Post* that he “saw Canada as a union of two nations rather than ten provinces,”³² and in 1964, he claimed in a speech that he was “not a separatist, but [he] could become one.”³³ The mild success of the R.I.N. and the R.N.

²⁶ Edward M. Corbett, *Quebec Confronts Canada* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967), 95.

²⁷ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 55.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 117.

²⁹ Fraser, *René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power*, 39.

³⁰ Paulin, *René Lévesque: Charismatic Leader*, 73.

³¹ Penner, “Quebec Explodes a Bombshell,” 157.

³² Provencher, *Rene Levesque: Portrait of a Quebecois*, 199.

³³ Fraser, *René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power*, 32.

helped convince Lévesque that Quebecers were growing more accepting of a separatist agenda.³⁴

1967 was an important year for Lévesque, as he decided to leave the Liberal Party. This decision was integral to Lévesque eventually becoming premier because his split from the Liberals allowed him to create his own party. In April, Lévesque met with a group of about twenty Liberals at Mont Tremblant to discuss the future of the Liberal Party. By September of the same year, Lévesque presented his “Option for Quebec.”³⁵ The speech, which was supposed to confirm that his Laurier riding-association would endorse the Liberals in the upcoming party convention, turned into a three-hour rant about his vision of Quebec’s future.³⁶ His time spent in Lesage’s government had shown him the degree in which Quebec affairs were “left to the hands of outsiders.”³⁷ Since Lévesque had proven his capabilities under Lesage, there was a group of Liberals who believed in his leadership. During the Liberal Convention in October, Lévesque left the party—one hundred of his followers leaving with him.³⁸

As soon as he left the Liberals, Lévesque began working on the creation of his own party. He had been inspired by the success of the separatists, and believed that the only logical direction for his career was to move towards independence for Quebec.³⁹ The separatists had regarded Lévesque as a possible leader of their cause since he had pushed his nationalization scheme. However, Lévesque wanted a fresh start outside of the existing separatist movements. The creation of the Mouvement Souveraineté-Association (M.S.A) was the first step towards a united party.⁴⁰ The M.S.A. eventually merged with the R.N., resulting in the creation of the Parti Québécois.⁴¹ According to the *Globe and Mail*, there was “no serious challenge to [Lévesque’s] authority”⁴² at the convention, revealing the sentiment that Lévesque

³⁴ Penner, “Quebec Explodes a Bombshell,” 157.

³⁵ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 129.

³⁶ Fraser, René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power, 42.

³⁷ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 125.

³⁸ Penner, “Quebec Explodes a Bombshell,” 157.

³⁹ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 141.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 159.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 169.

⁴² Frank Howard, “Rene Levesque: the leader who has found a party,” *Globe and Mail*, October 15, 1968.

was the ideal leader of the separatists. A week after the convention, the R.I.N. dissolved, many of its members joining the Parti Québécois.⁴³

The formation of the Parti Québécois was a significant step in Lévesque's career. Since he was the founder of the party, the platform was formed around his ideas.⁴⁴ Because of this, Lévesque became the first separatist leader to be viewed as "indispensable."⁴⁵ In addition, by creating a new party rather than simply joining an existing one, the separatist movements in Quebec were able to combine into a cohesive force. Although Lévesque considered himself left in his political leanings, he was welcoming to other points of view. This inclusiveness allowed Lévesque to seize control of almost the entirety of the Quebec separatist movement, as only a handful of far-right and far-left separatists refused to join the Parti Québécois.⁴⁶ Lévesque's reputation as a charismatic politician was also of extreme importance to the separatist movement. His leadership gave the new party a level of respectability which the separatist movements had consistently lacked in the past.⁴⁷ Lévesque now had the party he needed to seize power; however, there were still some changes that had to be made before the Parti Québécois was elected.

The Parti Québécois participated in two elections prior to 1976, and was not particularly successful in either. In 1970, the party emerged second in popular vote; however, their success was not translated into seats. Although the party increased its popular support in 1973, it lost a seat.⁴⁸ Bourassa's Liberals had received a majority in 1973. Because of this, some of the Liberal backbenchers were left with "time on their hands to cultivate their private and public vices."⁴⁹ The Liberals were plagued with a series of scandals, and the party gained a careless image. The main problem with the Liberals, however, was their inability to inspire.⁵⁰ Unable to define themselves in the minds of voters, Lévesque recognized that the Parti Québécois could capitalize on the Liberals' shortcomings by redefining themselves as a party.

⁴³ James William Hagy, "René Lévesque and the Quebec Separatists," *The Western Political Quarterly* 24, no.1 (1971): 57.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁵ Desbarats, *René: A Canadian in Search of a Country*, 171.

⁴⁶ Hagy, "René Lévesque and the Quebec Separatists," 58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁸ Penner, "Quebec Explodes a Bombshell," 157.

⁴⁹ Pierre Dupont and Sheila Fischman, *How Levesque Won* (James Lorimer & Company Limited, 1977), 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

It was because of the changes made to the Parti Québécois after the election of 1973 and the campaign for the election of 1976 that brought the party to power. One of the main failings of the Parti Québécois had been its disorganization, so Michel Carpentier was appointed as a full-time chief organizer.⁵¹ The party was also decentralized and local organizations were set up in various regions of Quebec. This allowed the Parti Québécois to attract new members who had previous political experience.⁵² In order to differentiate itself from the scandalous Liberals, Lévesque did his best to promote the Parti Québécois as a clean alternative. The party was only financed by its members and sympathizers, and large rallies were avoided because they could make the party seem too dominating.⁵³ Membership increased because of the Parti Québécois' "democratic" image, since the public felt like their voices would be better heard in a new party.

The Parti Québécois changed significantly in a short period of time; the most important decision, however, made by Lévesque before the 1976 campaign was on the issue of separatism. In 1973, the election had been fought almost purely on the basis of Quebec independence. Playing on fear, Bourassa warned Quebecers that leaving confederation would have dire economic consequences for the province. In response, the Parti Québécois had defended their ideas by producing a detailed budget.⁵⁴ The Parti Québécois realized that its platform of separating from Canada alienated some of the possible electorate; therefore, in 1974, the party promised that it would not move towards independence without a referendum.⁵⁵ This decision created rifts in the Parti Québécois because it had been built on the concept of Quebec independence; however, the decision also allowed for a significant increase in support for the party. With the addition of Lévesque's charisma and reputation as a leader, the Parti Québécois began to emerge as a serious political contender.

The campaign ran by the Parti Québécois in 1976 was the last step in bringing Lévesque to power. Since the Liberals had been successful in 1973, Bourassa decided that his party would follow a similar strategy in 1976. However, since the Parti Québécois had promised a referendum on separatism, the Liberals were less able to

⁵¹ Dupont and Fischman, *How Levesque Won*, 36.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 38.

⁵⁴ Penner, "Quebec Explodes a Bombshell," 158.

⁵⁵ Fraser, *René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power*, 65.

condemn its agenda.⁵⁶ The party attacked the Liberals for their scandals, and dominated the media by spreading their election promises throughout the 28 day campaign.⁵⁷ The public's focus was shifted onto the party's social-democratic platform and the corruption of the Liberals. Bourassa was put on the defensive, and Lévesque became hopeful. On the night of the election, Lévesque assumed that the Parti Québécois would be able to win at least 40 seats. He was wrong; the party won a 71 seat majority.⁵⁸ After the victory, the *New York Times* claimed that Lévesque was "universally respected" in Quebec, even by the "strongest adversaries of his ideal independence."⁵⁹ The name Lévesque had built for himself expanded outside the separatist movement. In a speech made two months after the election, Lévesque reminisced on his party's success, complimenting it on its "ferocious determination."⁶⁰ The victory of the Parti Québécois was only the beginning; Lévesque would continue to embody this "ferocious determination" throughout the remainder of his political career.

From his political debut, it became clear that René Lévesque's perseverance would take him far. The success he achieved through the nationalization of Hydro-Quebec gave Lévesque the respectability he needed to rise to power. Embracing his reputation as a Quebec nationalist, Lévesque was able to unify the Quebec separatist movements and create his own party. The changes made to the Parti Québécois after the election of 1974 helped the party run a successful campaign in 1976, resulting in Lévesque becoming premier. Although Lévesque may have been gruff, and at times controversial, his unwavering commitment to his Québécois identity made him an instrumental force in Canadian history.

⁵⁶ Dupont and Fischman, *How Levesque Won*, 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁸ Fraser, *René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power*, 67.

⁵⁹ "Separatist Who Will Govern Quebec: Rene Levesque," *New York Times*, November 17, 1976.

⁶⁰ René Lévesque, "Quebec: A Good Neighbor in Transition" *Vital Speeches of the Day* 43, no.9 (1977): 284.

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