What We Can Learn from the National Unity Crisis in Canada

Individual Rights Key to Restoring National Unity:

Pressure group warfare causes public despair

by Glenn Woiceshyn

(This article by AOB-member Glenn Woiceshyn was published in the Ottawa Citizen *on Friday September 19, on the Commentary page.)*

"National unity crisis" makes many Canadians immediately think of the looming threat of Quebec separation. But the crisis is broader. Many non-Quebeckers are fed up with the way the federal government is running the country.

Quebec separatism is one manifestation, albeit the most serious and urgent one, of widespread national disunity.

While many Canadians are trying to solve "our national unity crisis," few understand its cause.

National unity is an effect, not a cause. It cannot be sustained by a collective act of desire divorced from political policies.

Policies that necessitate conflict will never achieve national unity, no matter how much "the people" wish otherwise. To sustain unity, one must first understand the root cause of its destruction.

The easiest way to understand the cause of disunity is not to retrace the complex historical details that led to our nation's disunity, but to consider a somewhat hypothetical situation that involves the person you know best—yourself.

Imagine that you live in a country with people from diverse backgrounds who are basically self-responsible and self-reliant. You don't necessarily like or agree with everyone, but they respect your basic rights and you respect theirs. You associate and trade with people on a voluntary basis. The government is there only as a background presence, to help resolve contractual disputes and to protect you from domestic criminals and foreign invaders via the police and military.

Now imagine a political change brought about by a group of intellectuals who complained that people are overly involved in their own private affairs rather than the "public interest."

Imagine that the government is given the power to do virtually anything, so long as it gets approved, democratically, by a majority vote of elected regional representatives.

A large group of people lobby the government to establish public schools and hospitals in the name of "public interest."

Another group forms to lobby for public radio, television and transportation.

"That's okay," you tell yourself, "I'll use these services."

A group of businessmen forms to get government to restrict foreign imports in the name of protecting domestic industries, so you are forced to pay more for goods.

A group of workers pushes for special labor laws to protect workers from "greedy" employers, so you find yourself hampered by a proliferation of strikes.

A group of seniors pushes for government pensions, and a youth group pushes for free university tuition.

Several groups with unclear foreign connections lobby for foreign aid.

A group of working parents lobby for free day care, and a group of women pressure the government for, among other things, money in order to cover their lobbying costs.

All "favors" and handouts are pursued in the name of "public interest."

You can't keep track of all the pressure groups forming; all you are certain of is that your taxes (and the government debt) keep rising.

You wonder what exactly "public interest" means, but the philosophy professor from a government-subsidized university explained, on public radio, that "words don't have precise meaning, and thank God because the fluidity and flexibility of words serve the public interest."

One day, your company is forced to lay you off because it lost a big government contract it expected to land, which went, instead, to a competitor in the predominantly French region for "national unity" reasons.

When applying for a new job, you're told that you don't qualify under the new hiring laws because you are a "straight," white male.

Several pressure groups —including that same women's group that receives government funding for lobbying—managed to get the employment laws changed in the name of equality and harmony of race, sex and sexual orientation.

You find a company that, via political connections, managed to get around the employment restrictions, but then they suddenly stopped hiring because an environmental lobby representing the interests of trees pressured the government to halt the company's logging activities.

You find that you have grown to distrust and even despise your fellow citizens.

Out of frustration and self-protection, you decide to join a pressure group.

But which group? A simple and popular choice is one based on ethnic origin, but unfortunately you are part-Irish, part-Ukrainian and part-French.

You try the French group because it's large and powerful, but you're refused because you don't speak the new official language. You always wanted to study French, a beautiful language, but you grow to despise things forced upon you.

You notice that people are spending less time engaged in productive work and more time trying to loot and control others via the government.

As the debt climbs and the economy deteriorates, people start lashing out at various scapegoats, such as immigrants, "the rich," the French, easterners, westerners, et al.

Politicians are blamed and despised the most because they always break their election promises and flip-flop on every issue, all the while claiming to be motivated by "public interest."

If a politician tried to adhere to a principle, such as free trade, he'd be denounced by the various pressure groups that feel threatened by it.

In despair, politicians end up pleading for "tolerance" and compromise, where everything is negotiable except the idea that everything is negotiable.

Despite their pleas, things get worse. The predominantly French region threatens to separate. There had always been a separatist movement but the new separatist leaders have cashed in on the chaos and disunity throughout the country, and have managed to inflame old nationalist feelings to new heights.

Some French people don't really want to separate but indicate otherwise in order to secure special handouts and "favors" from the government.

Other ethnic groups catch on and indicate they too want sovereignty.

The French separatist leaders see this as a threat to their power grab, so they announce that once they separate, no other ethnic group within their region can do so.

You and others conclude that politics is inherently corrupt, that people are inherently contradictory and fractious, and that national unity is impossible in a big country.

You all then decide to split it up into smaller regions so that politicians are "closer to the people."

Later on, you find that this doesn't work either because pressure-group warfare reappeared within the sovereign regions.

Sound familiar?

This, in pattern, is what has been happening to Canada over the past few decades. When people are able to seize special "favors" and handouts at others' expense, via a fluid concept known as "public interest," a concept which somehow came to exclude the rights of individuals, the inevitable result is pressure

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