

Québec's mutation

Demographic growth seems assured for the next few decades with social and immigration factors contributing to a current mini-boom

Simon Langlois

Like the rest of North America, Québec is in the throes of a vast demographic mutation as international immigration transforms the ethnic and linguistic mix of its population. To cope with such change, it has instituted legislation and policies that have few parallels elsewhere. Analysis of demographic trends in Québec sheds light on issues that are relevant to recent constitutional debates.

An element that sets Québec apart is the fact its marriage rate is markedly lower than in the rest of Canada and the United States, and the situation now may be described as critical. More and more births occur out of wedlock, the number of unmarried couples having gone from 16 per cent in 1961 to approximately 40 per cent in 1993.

Simultaneously, Québec's birth rate has declined dramatically over the past 25 years. By the end of the '80s, it stood at 1.4 per woman of age to reproduce, among the lowest in the world.

The two tendencies may not be unrelated since it is certain unmarried couples have fewer children than their married counterparts.

Québec has taken more steps than any other Canadian province to foster family formation. It has followed the European model by offering a bonus to families having children. Such measures appear to have had some success: since 1988, the birth rate has increased to 1.7.

For its part, the flow of international immigrants to Québec, substantial in the '50s, diminished during the '80s to about 25,000 per year. But the '90s have witnessed a marked increase – 51,400 in 1991 and 47,500 in 1992 – principally because of admission of refugees. Québec receives proportionately more refugees than other parts of Canada, indeed as many as does France whose population is eight times as large.

Yet Québec receives only 15 to 18 per cent of the immigrant inflow to Canada. About one-third of those coming to Québec have a knowledge of French, many more than in the past.

But Québec has always found it difficult to keep immigrants. Some 30 per cent of them are believed to have moved to other provinces between 1970 and 1980. That tenden-

cy has changed since 1988 with a higher percentage remaining. Recent newcomers are more aware of the Québec reality and more have a knowledge of French, making it easier for them to integrate. Québec, which has the power to select some immigrants, has set up centers to facilitate their integration into the French-speaking mainstream.

Québec's net migratory balance, negative from 1961 to 1984, probably due to the departure of numerous English-speaking persons from 1970 to 1980, has also been turned around. It has been positive since 1985 and has continued to improve in the '90s as departures decline with stabilization of the situation with respect to the English-speaking minority over the past five years.

Hence the population trend has taken a turn for the better. A rising birth rate, more immigrants and fewer departures created a mini-boom in the first half of the '90s and delayed an anticipated decline in total population, now about seven million. Recent projections indicate no decrease until 2030 and possibly 2040. The population is expected to reach 7.8 million by 2010.

The number of Québécois who claim French as their mother tongue has been stable since the turn of the century when it was 82 per cent of the total. Down to 81.6 in 1941, it had grown to 82.5 by 1991.

The number of Québécois claiming English as their mother tongue has diminished – from 13.1 per cent in 1941 to 9.2 per cent in 1991. But the number having neither French nor English as mother tongue has increased from 4.3 to 8.3 per cent over the same period. ■

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