

Cultural Policy and Cultural Life: Québec's Experience

The object of this article is to draft a brief history of cultural policymaking in Québec through various initiatives adopted by successive governments in largely French-speaking Québec since the middle of the 20th century. These initiatives have been instrumental in the development of an amazingly rich and diversified cultural life within Québec. First born out of a compelling desire to protect the French-speaking majority's language and cultural heritage in the province, over time Québec's views on the definition of "culture" and the role of cultural policymaking have evolved substantially.

To understand why Québec has embarked on this singular path, it helps to consider a few facts about "la Belle Province". Québec is home to 8 million inhabitants in a territory almost four times that of California, with more than 80% of the population living on a narrow strip on both shores of the St-Lawrence River. Eighty-three percent of Quebecers currently use French as their first language, while 11% are primarily English-speaking and 6% are allophones. Québec's slightly more than 6.2 million francophones are surrounded by about 248 million English speakers.

The fact that French-speaking Quebecers were in the middle of a sea of anglophones was enough to persuade provincial government leaders at the dawn of the Quiet Revolution in the early 1960s that the francophones should give themselves the means to protect their heritage. They indeed feared that, without state intervention, their French language and culture would be unable to survive in the midst of an overwhelmingly English-speaking Canada and subjected as they were to the inescapable influence of the United States.

So, in April 1961 the Liberal Party government of Premier Jean Lesage created the *ministère des Affaires culturelles du Québec* (Québec Department of Cultural Affairs). The first minister in charge, Georges-Émile Lapalme, saw the new agency's mission as three-pronged: 1) facilitating access to culture (defined as the Fine Arts) for the greatest number of Quebecers; 2) encouraging pride in the French language; 3) supporting other francophone communities. This was not the first state foray in this sector, since several cultural institutions were created with government funding in the decades prior (public libraries, music and theatre conservatories, museums, etc.), but it was the first time that any Québec government articulated its rationale for cultural policymaking as a prerequisite to Québec's development as a society. In the words of then Premier Jean Lesage:

We believe that the creation of a department of cultural affairs is of vital necessity. It is all the more an imperative since it allows us to honor another promise at this particular juncture when the Québec population as a whole is more than ever aware of the contribution the new department will be able to make toward the fulfilling of our potential as a nation." (MCCCF(2011), *Révolution tranquille – Un courant d'inspiration en culture*, excerpt from Jean Lesage's speech at the tabling of the bill creating the *ministère des Affaires culturelles*.¹

The same year, Québec opened its Paris Delegation, followed by the Québec Government Office in London in 1963. It was the beginning of a movement toward extending Québec's

¹ (MCCCF (2011), *Révolution tranquille – Un courant d'inspiration en culture*, excerpt from Jean Lesage's speech at the tabling of the bill creating the *ministère des Affaires culturelles* (Department of Cultural Affairs), March 2, 1961, [translated from French]).

constitutional powers in cultural matters to its international relations. Several cultural agreements, first with France, then other countries and regions, were signed during this and the following decades. Paralleling this trend, the 70s saw the opening of regional cultural offices throughout Québec and, as the decade came to a close, Québec began to enter into cultural partnership agreements with municipalities.

Diane St-Pierre, holder of the *Chaire Fernand Dumont sur la culture* at the *Institut national de recherche scientifique*, sees a continuous thread over several phases in the Québec Government's involvement in culture. From its inception in 1961 the role of the *ministère des Affaires culturelles* was one of administrator and funder of programs, but in the 1980s, the definition of the government's responsibilities in the cultural sector - began to change. With the increasing globalization of the economy – and the growing fears that the very survival of national cultures might be threatened, a more anthropologic definition of culture began to emerge. Culture was now seen as the “glue” that holds the community together, an essential ingredient to the quality of life and a powerful catalyst of creativity.

In response to the changing economic environment of the 1980s and 90s, a number of programs to support the arts and laws recognizing and protecting the professional status of artists were adopted. And, in 1992 came a major milestone, the passing into law of an overarching cultural policy, *Notre Culture, Notre Avenir* (Our Culture, Our Future).

The new policy, a first in North America for its scope and ambition, enshrined the people's access to culture as a right that is the government's sacred duty to ensure, on the same level as road building, commerce, healthcare and education. It also recognized the major contribution of the arts to Québec's economy by creating two government corporations: the *Société de développement des entreprises culturelles* (SODEC) and the *Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec* (CALQ). Their Québec-wide mandate was to support artistic creation, experimentation and production; to facilitate the dissemination of works produced by Québec's artists and cultural enterprises; and to broaden their visibility and influence both domestically and abroad.

Notre Culture, Notre Avenir also accelerated the trend toward devolving more cultural policy authority to municipalities. As they came to recognize the economic value of their cultural “assets”, cultural spending by cities grew by 55% between 1990 and 2003.

The emphasis on the economic importance of cultural resources and their impact on the quality of life and sustainable development has resulted in a broadening of the objectives of municipalities in the realm of cultural programming, way beyond their traditional responsibilities: public libraries, collective heritage and social activities. These objectives now encompass economic, cultural, social, environmental and educational development.²

There are currently about 90 such agreements between the Québec Government and cities, counties and First Nations councils throughout the province.

Today, the Québec Government's cultural apparatus is headed by the *ministère de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine* (Department of Culture, Communications and the Status of Women). Its mission is to affirm Québec's cultural identity

² Diane St-Pierre (2006), *Des Approches de soutien aux Arts et à la culture distinctes au sein des communautés canadiennes et québécoises: Portrait des conseils locaux des arts*, [translated from the original French].

and vitality; to facilitate access to culture and the participation of citizens in the cultural life. The department is supported in its mission by a network of 13 government agencies and corporations under the jurisdiction of the minister of Culture, Communications and the Status of Women. They provide services to their respective clienteles in the performing arts, cinema, television, music, publishing, heritage sites and artifacts, museums, libraries, etc. The Québec delegations throughout the world are also instrumental in promoting Québec's artists and cultural industries abroad.

Since the end of the 1990s, the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions have been a continuing governmental priority. The changing regulatory framework in international trade and fast-moving economic globalization challenged the rationale for the critical support role many states and governments throughout the world play in matters of culture for the benefit of the citizens they represent.

This new context posed a threat to Québec's governmental initiatives designed to protect and support its distinctive culture. The Québec Government, along with other such as France's, became convinced that the traditional position based on the 'cultural exception' defense was leading to a dead end. It resolutely decided to shift its stance to an advocacy strategy focusing on the promotion and protection of cultural diversity. Québec was one of the first governments to officially declare, in the ministerial statement of June 16, 1999, that it was in favor of an international instrument recognizing the right of states and governments to formulate and implement their own cultural policies and to adopt measures to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions. In the fall of 1999, the Canadian Government announced its support for such a treaty.

In the past several years, the Québec Government has been very proactive, both at home and abroad, in advocating the preservation of the diversity of cultural expressions around the world. On the home front, Québec helped launch the Coalition for Cultural Diversity, an advocacy organization that originated from within its own cultural community and now stretches across Canada. Today, the Coalition acts as the secretariat for the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity (IFCCD), founded in Spain in 2007. The IFCCD includes among its founding members 42 national cultural diversity coalitions, bringing together more than 600 professional cultural organizations representing creators, artists, producers, distributors, broadcasters and publishers from the film, television, music, live entertainment, visual arts fields and book industries.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) formally adopted the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* on October 20, 2005. Less than a month later, the Québec National Assembly unanimously approved the text of the Convention, making Québec the world's first government to support this standard-setting instrument. On November 28, 2005, Canada became the first state to ratify the Convention.

Since then, Québec has continued to garner support for the Convention, pushing for its ratification by as many governments as possible. To date, 125 parties (124 states and the European Union as an integrated regional economic organization) have ratified the treaty. Québec is actively involved in its implementation. Through a historic agreement between the Government of Québec and the Government of Canada concerning UNESCO signed in 2006, Québec participates as a member of the Permanent Delegation of Canada in UNESCO

proceedings, meetings, and conferences. It also has the right to address the sessions, complete the Canadian position and express Québec's voice.³

The latest phase in Québec's thinking about cultural policy is the belief that cultural diversity is just as important to the future of societies as biodiversity to the future of life on earth. It is a new paradigm that looks at culture as a major transversal component of sustainable development, the others being social, economic and environmental. The Québec Government enshrined its commitment to taking action toward strengthening the links between culture and the other dimensions of development by adopting the *Agenda 21 de la Culture du Québec* (Agenda 21 for the Culture). This document serves as a framework stating the principles to be followed and the objectives to be achieved in order to integrate culture in sustainable development. Québec's Agenda 21 for Culture affirms that culture is:

- A vehicle that carries meaning, identity and community values;
- A vector for democracy, intercultural dialogue and social cohesion;
- A catalyst for creativity, economic development and wealth creation; and
- A guide for land-use planning and development.

Ex-premier Jean Charest explained that "...Based on the conviction that the future of Culture depends on the involvement of all sectors of society, Québec's Agenda 21 for Culture includes a charter that facilitates adhesion by the civil society and is assorted of a plan of action that will be reflected in and improve on the sustainable development plans of our public administration."⁴

Nowadays, Québec's cultural policy is still about affirming its identity, but it is a "big tent" identity that recognizes it has benefited throughout its history from multiple influences, including the First Nations, France, Great Britain and the many countries that sent immigrants to its shores. Québec's cultural life continuously renews itself by encouraging a creative dialogue between the cultural communities established within its borders and with the many foreign artists it welcomes every year to its cultural festivals in all artistic disciplines. For the size of its population, Québec offers its citizens an incredibly diversified cultural life widely open to the world.

That Québec's Francophone culture was able not only to survive but thrive is a testament to the foresight of the Quiet Revolution's leaders and those who followed. But a funny thing happened on the road to cultural affirmation that Québec has been following so eagerly for the past 50 years: Québec has learned a couple of truths about culture.

One of these lessons is that culture is an invaluable help in international relations and the practice of diplomacy. Indeed, Québec's distinctive culture has long been its best business card abroad. Helping artists and other cultural players to protect their works, help them acquire a higher international profile and use foreign markets in order to generate greater value for their creative outputs remains a governmental priority. When Québec is mentioned in foreign media stories, it's more than half the time about the achievements of its artists. Furthermore, in the many bilateral agreements Québec has entered into with countries and regions toward in the

³ Agreement between the Government of Canada and the Government of Québec concerning the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2006.

⁴ *Institut de l'énergie et de l'environnement de la Francophonie* (June 2012), "*L'intégration de la culture au développement durable – La démarche du Québec*", [translated from French], in *Liaison Énergie-Francophonie*.

world, it is most of the time the cultural clauses that have given an impetus to economic cooperation. At home, the cultural sector accounted for 4.1% of the Gross Domestic Product and more than 130,300 jobs in 2009. And this sector is growing: from 2001 to 2006, the number of creators who live from their art increased by 10%, compared to 3% of Québec workers in other economic sectors.⁵

What Québec has learned through the years is that governmental investment in culture helps improve the quality of life of its citizens, by giving them a way to lead more gratifying intellectual, emotional and spiritual lives. Cultural activities provide many other social benefits, including a greater understanding between ethnic communities and improved social cohesion. Overall, Québec's determination to develop and implement its own cultural policy, an experiment in "social engineering" as some would call it, has given birth to a cultural brew that has creativity and innovation at its core and is quite unique in its opening to the world.

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