

QUEBEC AND LA FRANCOPHONIE: CHOOSING TO ENGAGE INTERNATIONALLY

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Abstract

This research essay outlines a brief introductory history of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) and Quebec's participation in the organization. The essay points out the reasons behind Quebec's decision to join the OIF and what the province contributes to it as a whole. The benefits that Quebec receives as a member of the OIF are also outlined. Furthermore, it describes Canada's initial hesitation for Quebec to join the OIF in part because Quebec is a Canadian province and not a nation state. The research essay then concludes by summarizing all the main points about Quebec and the OIF.

Résumé

Cette étude fournit un bref historique de l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) et de la participation du Québec à cet organisme. Il montre les raisons qui ont mené le Québec à se joindre à l'OIF, l'ensemble de ses contributions ainsi que les avantages qu'il en retire. L'étude décrit également les résistances initiales du Canada à la participation du Québec à l'OIF en partie dû au fait que le Québec est une province canadienne et non un État-nation. En conclusion, l'étude offre un résumé des points principaux sur le Québec et l'OIF.

Introduction

The purpose of this research essay is to examine Quebec's engagement in the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF). This analysis advances the argument that the province has historically approached, managed and promoted its relationship with La Francophonie as a fundamental cornerstone of Quebec's ongoing (indeed purposeful) efforts to define and defend its role and identity as a significant and meaningful actor in the international community. The essay utilizes primary source materials (including personal

interviews conducted with senior officials from the Quebec Ministry of International Relations and La Francophonie, and the Charter of La Francophonie), as well as multiple scholarly, peer-reviewed sources.¹

This essay will review the historical formation of the OIF, Quebec's involvement with La Francophonie, and finally offer an evaluative assessment on the province's engagement with the OIF. The following questions will anchor and inform this inquiry: a) What historical forces contributed to and most fully explain the desire for, and emergence of, the OIF – i.e., when did it arise and why? b) What is the OIF's mission and focus? c) What historical and political forces propelled Quebec to consider engagement with La Francophonie? d) How has Quebec sought to utilize membership in the OIF to secure its interests? e) How has Quebec's involvement with the OIF changed over time – i.e., has the engagement been substantive or symbolic? f) What types of initiatives and consequences have Quebec's engagement, as a member of La Francophonie, historically had in/for the province? g) Have the original reasons underpinning Quebec's decision to join OIF been effectively met or secured? h) What have been the principal benefits, if any, of Quebec's membership in the OIF?; and, i) From a historical perspective, how has engagement with La Francophonie helped to define Quebec's identity as an actor in the international community?

Historical Background: the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie

In 1960, the founding fathers of what would come to be known as the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, identified the French language as a cornerstone issue around which to construct and launch a new international organization; an international organization with a global reach (principally in former French colonial states in Africa) focusing on shared issues of concern by French-speaking nations.² “Language was the key imperative,” underscores Christina Vigna, Director of the office of La Francophonie at the Quebec Ministry of International Relations and La Francophonie, “it was in fact the key issue that propelled Quebec to participate.”³ The conceptual basis of the OIF as an active organization and meaningful actor in the international community had enormous and immediate appeal to the Canadian province of Quebec. “We had an affinity helping developing French nations, at the end of colonialization, who were looking for funds for economic development,” Vigna notes.⁴ Equally significant as a driving force behind Quebec's decision to embrace the OIF were the considerable political, economic, social and cultural forces dramatically changing Quebec in the 1960s. The Quiet Revolution had

effectively ushered in a transformative influence on the proper role of the Quebec state, the relationship between the state and civil society, and Quebec's place in the world. This latter development found expression most clearly under Quebec's Deputy Premier and Minister of Education, Paul Gérin-Lajoie, who (in addition to championing the creation of a Ministry of International Relations), advocated for a visible, durable and meaningful presence for Quebec in international affairs.⁵ Quebec was vested with a responsibility to actively engage; it was, in Gérin-Lajoie's view, "the external extension of its [Quebec] domestic fields of jurisdiction."⁶

The first organizational meeting (which would effectively and ultimately emerge as the OIF) in 1960 had fifteen state representatives, including Quebec. "The first francophone organizations evolved out of intergovernmental bodies promoted by the colonial ties between France and Africa," notes Neathery-Castro and Rousseau, "but many elites from Quebec were prominent in their development."⁷ Following a variety of regional conferences, international meetings, and the formation of national associations throughout the 1960s, the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique (ACCT) was established in 1970,⁸ as La Francophonie's first formal institutional body.⁹ From the very outset (in the run up to, and with the establishment of the OIF), a critical and indeed thorny issue concerned the potential membership and role of Quebec. "France wanted to exclude Canada," one study suggests,

from the planned organization, reserving membership solely for Quebec. Canada naturally opposed this proposal, arguing that membership should be open only to countries, not to governments, and that Quebec would participate as a member of the Canadian delegation. France lobbied hard, directly and indirectly, during and after the Niamey (Niger) conference for independent membership for Quebec and a French-speaking government. Canada eventually agreed, much to the satisfaction of Quebec, which assumed membership in an international organization for the first time.¹⁰

This action – truly nothing short of groundbreaking, in essence effectively validating Quebec's position, for the first time, as an internationally recognized "independent" actor on the world stage – signaled, according to Gossage and Little, "the recognition of Quebec's 'international capacity' as a member of La Francophonie due to the pressure exerted by France at conferences held in the former French West African colonies, Gabon and Niger, between 1968 and 1970."¹¹ "Perhaps more important," in Donaghy and Carter's view, "the Niamey conference [1970] reinforced Canada's standing in the Francophone world and ensured that Canada with Quebec (rather than Quebec

without Canada) would have a seat at the table."¹² La Francophonie was thus effectively established on March 20, 1970: the signatories of the OIF "included 23 countries plus two associated states and one 'participating government' (a special category created for Quebec)."¹³ It was also determined during the OIF conference in Niamey, Niger, that Quebec journalist Jean-Marc Léger would serve as the organization's first Secretary General – the functions and responsibilities of which are contained in Article 6 of the OIF Charter.¹⁴

Quebec and La Francophonie: Involvement, Activities, and Effects

Quebec's involvement in La Francophonie, especially in the period 1970–1985, was marked by noticeable friction between Ottawa and Quebec City. "Federal officials," write Donaghy and Carter, repeatedly warned that "direct involvement in 'La Francophonie' would mean a radical departure from existing Canadian habits."¹⁵ Questions surrounding the precise role and status of Quebec in the OIF were ultimately resolved in 1985 by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Quebec Premier Pierre-Marc Johnson who, in the words of Nelson Michaud, "resolved a long standing problem by defining the status that allowed Quebec an autonomous participation at the meetings and in the institutions of La Francophonie."¹⁶ Reflecting on this development, Christina Vigna argues that "Quebec wanted to have a clear voice on the international stage... La Francophonie was viewed as an asset."¹⁷ Echoing a similar refrain, Michel Constantin, Senior Policy Advisor to Director Vigna, unequivocally argues that the "OIF allows Quebec to have *access* to the international stage; *it is the only forum where we have such access*."¹⁸ La Francophonie is, for the province, an irreplaceable institutionalized mechanism through which to promote recognition of, and direct involvement in, the international community; it is, in the view of Neathery-Castro and Rousseau, "the sole international organization to which Quebec belongs where it enjoys full autonomous participation as if it were a sovereign state."¹⁹ Since Quebec has become a full member of the OIF, it has hosted two OIF summits, in 1987 and 2008.²⁰

The benefits of Quebec's participation in the OIF, suggest Neathery-Castro and Rousseau, are decidedly clear: 1) international prestige deriving from its governmental status that puts it on par with member status in OIF; 2) an important environment in which to consolidate Quebec's influence in multilateral forums like the UN and the Organization of African Unity (OAU); 3) strengthened alliances with the other member countries and governments; and, 4) mutually beneficial cultural, economic, and commercial exchanges, including

entry to emerging markets that play to Quebec's economic strength in the pharmaceutical, telecommunications, energy, and transportation sectors.²¹

To this end, Quebec's ongoing engagement in La Francophonie reflects the province's desire to identify and access global economic opportunities for Quebec trade and investment, while protecting and working to advance its French cultural heritage. Quebec's involvement with the OIF has deepened over time and is clearly substantive in nature. The OIF, as an international institution, helps Quebec directly advance those interests through trade arrangements with francophone (largely African) countries, and by setting trade rules in the language of exchange (i.e., French). "With its wealthy modern economy, high degree of globalization, and language politics, Quebec presents a unique case study to the issues animating the OIF... [Quebec's] desire to enhance the security of French, as well as to protect economic development in the global economy, ensures its active participation in the OIF."²² Quebec is also engaged in La Francophonie by providing regular assistance to several countries in an ongoing effort to establish more efficient and transparent electoral and legal systems – the most noteworthy commitment in this regard over the past decade has focused on Haiti. Article 8 of the OIF Charter specifically details a wide variety of cooperative avenues identified for pursuit by members.²³ As Constantin suggests: "what do we [Quebec] bring to the OIF? We bring initiatives and ideas to the organization. We champion new initiatives to serve member nations, especially the less developed countries... We hope that we can help Africa economically develop."²⁴

Quebec commits significant financial resources to La Francophonie. The province, for example, contributes ten percent (\$9.2 million) of the cumulative Ministry of International Relations and La Francophonie budget (\$92 million) to the OIF, with a total overall contribution of \$14 million dollars annually, making Quebec the fifth-largest contributor to the OIF from the current fifty-seven members.²⁵ This contribution, in Constantin's view, "is a testament to our commitment to the OIF."²⁶

Quebec and La Francophonie: Conclusions

This essay finds that Quebec's engagement – from the very outset in the 1960s to the present day – has been principally motivated by an overriding desire to secure a formal role and recognition (from Canada and the broader international community) for the province as an autonomous actor in international affairs.²⁷ OIF, as a francophone international institution, has proven to be the cornerstone of Quebec's commitment to active engagement in international relations. That

commitment, first and foremost motivated – then, as it is today – by nationalist political interests, has evolved and deepened over time to assume cultural, economic and social dimensions and opportunities for the province. As such, La Francophonie remains a useful mechanism for advancing Quebec's political, cultural, economic and linguistic interests.²⁸ It is “a forum to promote and defend and share our interests for Quebec internationally,” Vigna points out, allowing the province “to collaborate with other countries and reinforces our relationship where we do not have official diplomatic representation (i.e., Africa).”²⁹ Quebec's membership and activism in the OIF have, according to Constantin, allowed the province to leverage that track record, leading to Quebec's recent participation at the June 2012 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (i.e., the Rio Summit), and also at the Francophone Ambassadors group at the United Nations General Assembly.³⁰

It is clear, from a historical perspective, that membership in the OIF has achieved and indeed furthered Quebec's quest to be recognized and identified as an independent actor of substance in the international community. It is therefore reasonable to conclude by suggesting that the original motivations driving Quebec's decision to join and contribute to the OIF have been effectively secured; the focus, now and in the future, will be on maintaining and expanding that presence. “Our hope,” Constantin notes, “is to focus on economic development strategy for La Francophonie... we also hope to build upon education and cultural links, and to continue to lead in changing mentalities on gender issues.”³¹

ENDNOTES

1. Primary sources, coupled with analyses of secondary source material, allow for a robust historical review and explanation of the Quebec-OIF relationship.
2. See Brian Weinstein, "Francophonie: A Language-Based Movement in World Politics," *International Organization* Vol.30, No.3 (1976).
3. Interview with Christina Vigna, Ministry of International Relations and La Francophonie, Quebec, Quebec, October 10, 2014.
4. Ibid.
5. On the relationship between Gérin-Lajoie, Quebec nationalist currents and the intellectual underpinnings of Quebec's commitment to engagement in the international community, consult Christopher Kirkey, Stéphane Paquin, and Stéphane Roussel, "Charting Quebec's Engagement with the International Community," *American Review of Canadian Studies* Vol.46 No.2 (June 2016) p.141.
6. Nelson Michaud, "Quebec International Relations: Past and Current Directions," in Stephan Gervais, Christopher Kirkey and Jarrett Rudy, editors, *Quebec Questions: Quebec Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.390.
7. Jody Neathery-Castro and Mark Rousseau. "Quebec and La Francophonie: Quebec between Provincialism and Globalization," in *Quebec Questions: Quebec Studies for the Twenty-First Century* p.404.
8. Jody Neathery-Castro and Mark Rousseau. "Quebec, Francophonie and Globalization," *Québec Studies* Vol.32 (2001) p.16.
9. The ACCT focused, as the title suggests, on fostering greater collaboration across member states of the OIF on a broad range of cultural, technical and scientific areas. The OIF organizational structure has since been expanded to include a Ministerial Council, a Permanent Council of member states, and a Parliamentary Assembly. OIF Charter, www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/charter_francophonie.pdf, accessed November 4, 2014.
10. Neathery-Castro and Rousseau. "Quebec and La Francophonie," p.405.
11. Peter Gossage and J.I. Little, *An Illustrated History of Quebec: Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp.256-257.
12. Greg Donaghy and Neal Carter. "There Are No Half-Countries: Canada, La Francophonie, and the Projection of Canadian Biculturalism, 1960-2002." In Patrick James, Nelson Michaud and Marc J. O'Reilly, editors, *Handbook of Canadian Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006) p.140.

13. Neathery-Castro and Rousseau. "Quebec and La Francophonie," p.405.
14. OIF Charter, www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/charter_françophonie.pdf, accessed November 5, 2014.
15. Donaghy and Carter. "There Are No Half-Countries" p.137.
16. Nelson Michaud, "Canada and Quebec on the World Scene: Defining New Rules?," in Andrew F. Cooper and Dane Rowlands, editors, *Canada Among Nations 2006* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006) p.236.
17. Interview with Christina Vigna, October 10, 2014.
18. Interview with Michel Constantin, Ministry of International Relations and La Francophonie, Quebec, Quebec, October 10, 2014. Emphasis added.
19. Neathery-Castro and Rousseau. "Quebec and La Francophonie," p.403.
20. The general principles governing the convening of La Francophonie summit can be found in Article 6 of the OIF Charter, www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/charter_françophonie.pdf., accessed November 5, 2014.
21. Neathery-Castro and Rousseau. "Quebec and La Francophonie," p.409.
22. Neathery-Castro and Rousseau. "Quebec, Francophonie and Globalization," p.23.
23. OIF Charter, www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/charter_françophonie.pdf, accessed November 5, 2014.
24. Interview with Michel Constantin, October 10, 2014. As Constantin observed, however, the "main problem with less developed countries is governance... the absence of societally supported institutions."
25. Financial figures provided by Christina Vigna and Michel Constantin, interviews October 10, 2014.
26. Interview with Michel Constantin, October 10, 2014.
27. For a recent theoretical treatment of Quebec's international relations, consult Kirkey, Paquin, and Roussel, "Charting Quebec's Engagement with the International Community," pp.135–148.
28. Interview with Christina Vigna, October 10, 2014.
29. Ibid.
30. Interview with Michel Constantin, October 10, 2014.
31. Ibid.

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