

Sunday March 16, 2014

Crimea and Quebec have much in common

By Jim Taylor

I'm sure it's just a coincidence, but there seem to be some uncomfortable parallels between Quebec and Crimea.

The news media are paying lots of attention to Crimea these days because – I suspect – they fear it could be the flash point for war.

Residents of Crimea were scheduled to vote today in a hastily-arranged referendum on independence from Ukraine.

Three weeks from now, citizens of Quebec vote for a new government. It's not officially a referendum on independence. But given the Parti Quebecois' separatist roots, if Pauline Marois wins a majority, expect a referendum soon after.

A caveat here -- I don't live in Quebec; I have no first-hand knowledge of Quebecois sentiments. And I know nothing about Crimea beyond what I can read. So I know I'm dabbling in deep water when I compare their political situations.

Still, it seems to me that although Quebec and Crimea are almost half a world apart – nine time zones, to be precise – there are some surprising similarities.

Both were once independent and distinct nations, until conquered by an imperial power: Quebec in 1759, by British forces under General James Wolfe; Crimea in 1789, by Russia.

Similarities

Both base their claims to independence on language and ethnic origins.

Quebec can literally trace its collective DNA to some 2600 original French settlers. Crimea's history is longer than Quebec's, so it's harder to trace ethnic origins. Given its strategic position on the Black Sea, Crimea has been overrun by more than a dozen foreign powers, including Genghis Khan's Mongols. All contributed to ethnic mixing. But it's clear today that around 60 per cent of Crimeans speak Russian and consider themselves Russian; only about 25 per cent claim connections to Ukraine.

Quebec has an even stronger linguistic tilt: over 80 per cent of Quebecois are francophones; only 8 per cent are anglophones.

In both cases, those language imbalances are largely reversed in the national context. Roughly 70 per cent of all Canadians speak English; 23 per cent speak French. Similarly, roughly 75 per cent of Ukrainians call Ukrainian their mother tongue; less than 20 per cent, Russian.

Voting also splits along the same language lines. The Russian-leaning eastern half of Ukraine elected exiled president Viktor Yanukovich; the western half deposed him.

To complicate matters, western Ukraine hates Russia, because of the Russian-imposed starvation that may have killed over seven million Ukrainians in the 1930s. Eighty per cent of the victims were of Ukrainian origin; only four per cent were Russian.

Ukrainians call this tragedy the Holodomor. They consider it a genocide as heinous as the Nazi Holocaust against Jews.

Autonomous regions

To add to these uncomfortable parallels, the governments of both Quebec and Crimea are considered relatively autonomous by their federal counterparts. Quebec already runs its own pension and tax systems. It has held two votes on secession; the last one lost by less than a single percentage point. Crimea actually declared itself independent in 1992, with its own Constitution, but stayed within Ukraine for the time being.

The Crimean referendum scheduled for today doesn't offer an option for the status quo. Loosely translated, the two questions ask

- Are you in favour of re-uniting Crimea with Russia?
 - Are you in favour of restoring the 1992 Constitution of the autonomous Republic of Crimea?
- In other words, do you want to join Russia immediately, or wait until after becoming independent?

Not surprisingly, Ukraine and Canada have reacted similarly to the threat of part of their territory seceding.

In Canada, former prime minister Jean Chretien crafted a Clarity Act. As I read it, the Act doesn't permit Quebec to vote itself out of Canada. Rather, it gives the federal government the authority to define the terms it might accept. Or might not accept.

In the same way, the Ukrainian government in Kyiv insists it will not accept the results of today's referendum there. Unless, of course, Crimeans vote against independence – highly unlikely, I gather -- in which case I'm sure Kyiv would consider the result definitive.

Resorting to force?

Would Kyiv resort to its armed forces to retain Crimea? Pierre Trudeau did, when he declared martial law to crush an abortive rebellion by the FLQ. But a small clique of armed radicals hardly compare with the Russian troops already controlling key areas in Crimea.

The current Ukrainian government is probably regretting that it gave up its nuclear weapons in 1994. If nothing else, nuclear weapons would have made a powerful bargaining chip.

In my lifetime, I can think of only one country where separation happened peacefully, when Czechoslovakia split into the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993.

If Scotland votes for independence this September, it may become the second peaceful example.

But Scotland has already won approval, in principle, from the parent U.K. government. Neither Crimea nor Quebec has similar permission. Western nations have declared that if Crimea does vote for some form of independence, they will not recognize the new nation.

Does that indicate how the world would respond to a similar vote in Quebec, if it should happen?

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YOUR TURN

There wasn't a column last week, just some musings about what might have gone into a column, if I had felt capable of writing. But you wrote letters anyway.

Isabel Gibson, for example, thanked me for printing all those letters about end-of-life treatment: "Great comments on the euthanasia column -- I learned something from every one. As for the Crimea, I hope you're wrong."

Jane Bennett also like the content of those letters: "Thank you for sharing the comments in this week's newsletter. In particular, those relating to palliative care from Dave Shearman: '... dying is a process that cannot be timed, scheduled, or otherwise controlled.'

"My mother is 94 and dealing with dementia (or Alzheimer's). It is heartbreakingly difficult to see her deal with confusion, loss, disorientation, etc. She often doesn't recognize her room, her things, her family. We all wonder what the purpose of this kind of life can be, for it appears there is no quality. It is good to be reminded that dying is indeed a process, something that is necessary, and sometimes a lot can be gained/learned from going through this process. By her, by her family (children, grandchildren, etc.) and maybe even by her caregivers. Thank you and Dave for pointing out the obvious to those who are too close to the situation to see it."

Ted Wilson, on the other hand, railed against what he saw in some of those letters: "The mantra of Palliative care may be 'Neither to hasten or prolong the process of dying.' but my experience is that too many of its practitioners equate quantity with quality. They can't see the forest for the trees. The last time I saw Mother she was a, by then tiny, form huddled under the blankets in a Palliative Care ward, just a few weeks from dying of dementia. The nurse came in and was boasting, GLOATING, that earlier in the day she had managed to persuade Mother to eat something. Why? WHY??? All the poor woman had to look forward to in life, if she was capable of any thought process whatsoever, was the ending. It is the last and most painful memory I have of my Mother.

Mother's sister also died of dementia. Her extended family decided, against my Aunt's wishes, to prolong her life as much as possible. By the time the inevitable happened Mother's dementia was too far advanced for her to be able to say 'Goodbye' to her best friend.

"Bev, Dave, step back. Take another look at what you are doing. When the end is coming, let it happen. Consider making it happen. End the misery -- don't prolong it. What kind of kindness is that?"

Fran Ota might have been writing about this week's column with her clarification: "Russian troops didn't ***exactly*** take over military bases in Crimea -- they have been there for a while. Russia and Crimea had/have an agreement -- up to 25,000 troops were allowed into Crimea but they had to remain on base. Russia had 15,000 troops already in Crimea, which have now gone ***off*** the base trying to bring Crimea under control. Yes it's a sneaky move by Putin using troops which were already there (and he may have brought in more) to try to wrest control back into Russia's influence. It's been a long and convoluted history."

James Russell shared a read that bears on the famous Charge of the Light Brigade, which I had quoted: "I'm finally reading 'Lawrence IN Arabia' (by Scott Anderson. Its sub-title ('War, deceit, imperial folly and the making of the modern middle east') is wholly accurate, and it's a great book for seeing just how stupid, arrogant and two-faced our leaders can be and with what catastrophic effect, especially during wars. It also shows how relatively junior folk, in the right circumstances, can manage amazing results (Lawrence was one, but the book highlights a number of others as well). Not a bad read for the times...."

Another Isobel, Isobel McGregor, sent along a link she received "from the BPFNA (Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America) -- it might add to your thoughts about the complicated Ukrainian issue."

The link <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2014/03/07-0> is described as "American Fantasies Put Ukrainian Lives at Risk." It's a good piece.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
