

# A land of means by no means

Is Quebec wealthy enough to go it alone?  
That depends on whose wealth we're talking about



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A little debate enflamed the Quebec chattering classes in early July, and died out quickly as our two-month summer and the mosquitoes passed in high gear. The question: does Quebec have the means to be a sovereign country? Yes, said the Liberal premier, Jean Charest, while in France and obviously grabbed by the splendour of the Republic. "Québec has the means to

choose its destiny, and is free to do it," he repeated in a *La Presse* op-ed a few days later. We told you so, said André Boisclair, head of the Parti Québécois, and other separatist leaders. What I meant, Charest explained in his op-ed, is that Quebec could be sovereign, but "it is not in the Quebecers' interest."

To be fair to Mr. Charest, he did use the fuzzier "Quebecers' interest," instead of the more grandiloquent "the interest of Quebec." If you look up the latter expression in Bibliothèque Branchée, a database covering part of the French Canadian press, you will find it about 200 times over the last 12 months.

Yet, the little debate was essentially a brush between two statist camps. What does it mean to say "Quebec has the means"? Who is Quebec? Whose money and whose interests are we talking about?

Quebec could be a sovereign country right now. With a 2004 GDP per capita of US\$27,204, it is one of the richest societies in the world, albeit poor by North American standards. The Quebecers' GDP per capita occupies the 55th slot among the 60 North American states and provinces, between West Virginia and Manitoba. But as a country, Quebec would rank 28th among more than 200, between Italy and Singapore, just a couple of notches below France and Canada.

So, is Quebec wealthy enough to be an independent country, which is presumably what Charest wants to say with his "having the means"? The problem with this question is that wealth does not just hang around for the taking, like bananas on a collective farm. Wealth is produced by the individuals to whom it will belong; this is why they produce it in the first place—for themselves. Wealth can be stolen, but only up to the point where it stops being created. Properly speaking, a wealthy society or country

can only be a place where there are many opportunities for individuals to create wealth for themselves.

Now, economic opportunities vary inversely with the obstacles raised against economic liberty. An independent capitalist Quebec would be wealthier than the socialist province of Quebec in socialist Canada. But this is presumably not what Messrs. Charest and Boisclair have in mind.

Now, consider expressions such as "Quebec's interest"—or "Canada's interest" or "name-your-flag's interest." One of the main lessons of the public-choice and social-choice strands of economic analysis in the 20th century is that, except if all individuals are alike, there is no such thing as a collective interest. Or, if there is, it is only in the very general and shallow sense of the interest of everybody to live in a workably peaceful society with as many economic opportunities as possible. It is scientifically impossible to add up the interests of all members of society, the ones who gain and the ones who lose, and obtain a meaningful net number.

This would be true even if there were no information and incentive problems in political processes. But there are. While we can (or must) assume that an individual

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is competent enough to choose his cellphone plan or his children's school, we have to admit that nobody is able to weigh the complex packages of garbled promises with inherently unknown consequences that politicians put forward in election campaigns. Moreover, it is in the interest of politicians to lie.

What purpose is served by word arrangements like "Quebec has the means to," "Quebec's interest" or, for that matter, "Quebec is a nation" or the CRTC's "Canadian values," if they have no ascertainable meaning in any serious social analysis? Newspeak was, in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the state-imposed language that made it impossible to raise unorthodox questions. Our political terminology is not that much different. Friedrich Hayek, the economic and legal theorist who won a Nobel Prize in 1974, talked about "Our Poisoned Language" (the title of a chapter in his last book). Empty political incantations serve the interests of different gangs of would-be rulers. **WS**