

## NATIONAL POST

### **Which Quebec values does Justin Trudeau view as superior?**

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Poor Justin Trudeau. Whatever federal leadership ambitions he may have harboured have been effectively napalmed by his comments that “I always say that if ever I believed Canada was really Stephen Harper’s Canada — that we were heading against abortion, against gay marriage, that we were going backwards 10,000 different ways — maybe I would think about wanting to make Quebec a country.”

When I first heard Mr. Trudeau’s words, they didn’t shock me as much as they appear to have inflamed the rest of the punditocracy. Not because Mr. Trudeau has a habit of putting his foot in his mouth, but because I’ve heard the same sentiments expressed by libertarian friends living in Quebec. If Ottawa starts to dictate morality, some would rather reside in a fiscally conservative Quebec than in a socially conservative Canada.

The catch, of course, is the words “in a fiscally conservative Quebec”. Quebec is currently anything but: according to a study issued late last year by the Institute for Marriage and Family Canada, the province now has the fifth-highest debt-to-GDP ratio in the world, behind Japan, Italy, Greece and Iceland. Another report issued last week by researchers at Montreal’s Hautes Etudes Commerciales shows the province will become the poorest in the federation in ten years if nothing changes: Quebecers work less, earn less, and own less, notably in terms of real property.

The stark reality for Quebec is this: if it were not part of Canada it couldn’t afford its *joie de vivre* and socially liberal priorities. Forget about government-subsidized daycare, free in vitro fertilization and cheap university tuition. As for abortions, sure you’ll be allowed to get one, but when a health system is strapped for cash, the availability of all procedures is bound to suffer. Quebec’s choices cost money, and transfer payments go a long way to making them possible.

Today, however, it appears Ottawa is shifting from accommodation to abandonment. Unilingual appointments, scrapping the gun registry, and celebrating the monarchy all represent a big stick in the eye to Quebec, prompting even big-C Conservatives to denounce their own government. In late January, Mulroney-era stalwart Peter White published an [open letter](#) deploring the fact that “Today, Quebec’s voice is practically absent in the corridors of power, or at least its voice has become feeble and easy to ignore.”

Also that month, one of the Conservative's senators from the province, Pierre Claude Nolin, refused to vote for the government's omnibus crime bill because of penalties related to growing marijuana plants. Mr. Nolin yelled "You're afraid, Minister!" at Public Safety Minister Vic Toews a few days later when the Senator was prevented from testifying to the Commons committee on the legislation, due to time constraints.

Justin Trudeau's remarks thus place him in interesting ideological company. More predictably, of course, separatists like my friend Jean Francois Lisée have seized on his comments as proof that Quebec needs to secede to retain its identity. This shows how desperate the separatist movement is becoming: taking a Trudeau into the fold would have previously been akin to kissing a cobra on the lips. But it also raises the question, what exactly is the identity that would be defended in a separate Quebec?

For while Mr. Trudeau may be right that Quebecers are more accepting of gay marriage and abortion, in one area they are notably less "progressive" than their fellow Canadians: his own father's policy of multiculturalism. To wit, according to a [Leger Marketing](#) poll taken in 2010, 73% of Quebecers support banning the burka, versus 54% of Canadians overall.

Another [Leger survey](#) taken in 2007 found 59% of Quebecers admitted to being racist to some degree, compared to 47% of those outside Quebec. And Quebec communities such as Hérouxville and Gatineau continued to make headlines as recently as December 2011 for "codes of conduct" and "values guides" designed to impress upon immigrants that certain behaviours – such as stoning women – are not permitted.

So when Mr Trudeau states that "... I believe deeply in Canada and I know that Quebec in Canada can put it back on the right path," it would be interesting to press him on just what path that is, who supports it, and who would pay for it. All questions that demand a lot more reflection not just from Mr. Trudeau, but from anyone musing on the future of a separate Quebec.