Duplessis and the Union National Administration

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Translated by the author

Ottawa, 1983

Reprinted with revised bibliographic note, 2000

CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
HISTORICAL BOOKLET No. 35
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DUPLESSIS AND THE UNION NATIONALE ADMINISTRATION

Maurice Le Noble Duplessis, Prime Minister of Quebec from 1936 to 1939 and again from 1944 until his death in 1959, was indeed a colourful figure. Although physically unremarkable, he did possess an elongated nasal appendage that delighted cartoonists. He dressed conservatively, and usually immaculately, except for a well-worn flat that he said brought him “closer to the people.” Intelligent and quick-witted, he was not at all an intellectual; indeed he would often boast of having both feet on the ground. His private life was rather austere, at least after his return to power in 1944, and he had few hobbies apart from listening to music and going to baseball games. He was, in essence, a politician and, as a bachelor, he liked to say he was married to his province.

And yet few Canadian politicians since Confederation have been as controversial as Duplessis. Admired by his friends, denounced by his enemies, he dominated the Quebec political scene for a quarter of a century. After his death, others attempted to build a new and more modern Quebec, liberated from what they perceived as the yoke of Duplessism, and numerous commentators, sharing the aspirations of Jean Lesage’s new Liberal government after 1960, painted a sombre portrait of the Union Nationale years under Duplessis. History’s judgements, though, are never final and other observers of the period, after 1970, have sought to study Duplessis with greater impartiality and even some sympathy.

The student of Duplessis is immediately faced with varying and even contradictory interpretations of the man. Even though he suffered daily humiliation in the Legislative Assembly at the prime minister’s hands, Georges-Émile Lapalme, leader of the Liberal opposition from 1950 to 1958, did not hide his admiration for this politician who “sensed the vibrations of the population as though he had applied a stethoscope.” Father Georges-Henri Lévesque, former Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Laval University and a bitter critic of the Union Nationale government, noted that Duplessis possessed “truly exceptional ability, an extraordinary lucidity,” but that at the same time he was “a very small-minded politician, since nearly all his political decisions, nearly all his deeds, were petty.” Duplessis’s biographers also disagree in their judgements of the man and the regime. For the journalist, Leslie Roberts, “the Chief” — as he titled his book — was motivated first and foremost by a “lust for power;” once in control, he acted “as brazenly as any Latin-American dictator.” The historian-priest, Lionel Groulx, professed in his Mémoires never to have had any illusions about Duplessis. Pierre Laporte,
then a reporter for the newspaper *Le Devoir*, described Duplessis as generous, but "unbelievably mean towards those he disliked," he was a "colourful, captivating" parliamentarian, "but had no respect for democratic principles." Conversely, Robert Rumilly, another historian, unceasingly praises the Union Nationale leader for his "profound love of his province and people" and his unfailing "instinct for Quebec’s national interests." Assuredly, if all were looking at the same individual, all were not seeing the same man.

There can certainly be no doubt that Duplessis’s success at the polls, except for the disaster of 1939, was remarkable. But as soon as the historian attempts a thorough study of the regime, he encounters serious problems of interpretation. Was Duplessis really a corrupt dictator whose only thought was the fate of his party and his own place at its head? Or should he rather be seen as the leader of his people, expressing their ambitions, personifying their will, defending their interests? Should it be concluded, as some suggest, that he "retarded" Quebec’s evolution, that he impeded progress towards a "modern society?" Or did he not, on the contrary, appreciate that French Canada constituted a distinct culture that had to be defended against the unflagging assaults of enemies who wanted to destroy it? In any case, Duplessis the person had multiple facets and, depending on which ones have been deemed important by historians and other authors who have studied him, the portrait of the man and of the regime varies greatly.

I. The Rise to Power

The fact that Maurice Duplessis entered provincial politics as a Conservative, a member of a party exiled to Quebec’s political wilderness since 1897 and showing few signs of revival, can be largely explained by family tradition. Had his father, Néré de, not been a Conservative member of the Legislature from 1886 to 1900? It should also be remembered, in order to understand his future relations with the Roman Catholic Church, that Duplessis’s birthplace of Trois-Rivières was the seat of the diocese of Msgr. Louis-François Laflèche and thus a bastion of ultramontanism and conservatism.

Duplessis was the type of politician, attentive to the needs and preoccupations of his constituents, who would become the backbone of the Union Nationale after 1944. From the time of his first election campaign, that of 1923 which resulted in his only defeat, Duplessis sought to develop a close relationship with the voters, and he responded to any local event that could be classed as noteworthy — births, baptisms, marriages, deaths, awards, and so on — by sending appropriate congratulations or condolences. Such attention was possible in rural areas and in small towns where there were relatively few voters — Trois-Rivières had about 5,000 electors in 1927 and the average
district in the province contained only 6,700. But thirty years later, when the average number of electors per district had climbed to 26,000 and when regional and provincial issues were to some extent replacing questions of purely local interest, this type of personal relationship was, except in underpopulated rural districts, much more difficult to practise. Such a change was to deal a heavy blow to the Union Nationale.

When Duplessis was elected as the member for Trois-Rivières for the first time in 1927, he joined a tiny Conservative caucus of nine MLAs in a Legislature dominated by seventy-five Liberals comfortably installed in power. Worse, under Arthur Sauvé’s leadership, the Conservative opposition was declining in strength (the party had elected nineteen candidates in 1923) and was being ravaged by internal strife. Camillien Houde, then mayor of Montreal, replaced Sauvé in 1929, but he lost his own seat in the 1931 election, although the Conservatives did succeed in increasing their proportion of the vote by nearly 8 per cent. Houde’s own leadership increasingly came under fire and he finally resigned in September 1932; Duplessis was chosen by the caucus as parliamentary Leader of the Opposition.

In his new capacity, Duplessis manifested some preoccupation for economic nationalism and he attacked the financial interests which he asserted were closely linked to the Liberal party. Duplessis also called for a principal agricultural credit plan and proclaimed the philosophy that he would respect as prime minister: in a speech given in the Legislature at the beginning of 1933, he invited the government to “look at the evidence and recognize, through its legislation and its deeds, that the province of Quebec has always been and will always be essentially agricultural.” And yet, according to the 1931 census, 65 per cent of the province’s citizens lived in towns and cities!

At the leadership convention held at Sherbrooke in October 1933, Duplessis easily defeated (by 332 to 214 votes) Onésime Gagnon, a Conservative MP who favoured closer links with the federal wing of the party and “the supreme leader, R.B. Bennett.” Is one to see in this victory the beginnings of the autonomism that Duplessis would champion later when he would boast of having established a provincial party free of all ties with any federal organization? Duplessis surely sensed Bennett’s growing unpopularity, but he himself proposed a resolution of support for the federal leader, although it was phrased in words that were less than glowing. If Duplessis triumphed at Sherbrooke, he did so mainly because his organization was superior to his rival’s and not because of any nationalist positions he espoused.

During the Depression, many groups within Quebec set about proposing solutions that, while avoiding socialism, would correct the worst abuses of
the capitalist system. Under the aegis of the Jesuit-directed École Sociale Populaire, a group of well-known Catholic laymen including Albert Rioux of the Catholic farmers' union, Wilfrid Guérin of the credit unions, and Alfred Charpentier of the Catholic labour unions, drew up in 1933 the "Programme de restauration sociale." This document provoked considerable interest amongst certain Liberals, like Paul Gouin, son of a former Quebec prime minister, Lomer Gouin. In 1934, these dissidents formed a new political party, Action Libérale Nationale, and attracted reform-minded nationalists like Philippe Hamel, Ernest Grégoire, and René Chaloult. Their programme, inspired by the principles of the "Programme de restauration sociale," promised a vigorous war against the trusts, especially the electricity trust; a cleaning-up of elections; the creation of a Ministry of Commerce; and the institution of certain labour reforms, although, it is true, unions themselves were not mentioned. Nevertheless, the very first article of the programme dwelt on agricultural reforms, the authors affirming their belief that "the task of economic restoration is principally a task of rural restoration, based on family-type agriculture and co-operatives."

The Quebec prime minister and Liberal party leader, Louis-Alexandre Taschereau, then at the height of his power and used to a two-party system that he could manage, evidently did not relish the establishment of a third party on the eve of the 1935 elections; Maurice Duplessis, leader of the Conservative party, was scarcely more enthusiastic. What chance would a divided opposition have of upsetting a regime so solidly ensconced in power? It was no surprise then that Duplessis, who roundly denounced Taschereau for favouring foreigners, neglecting the farmers, and undermining traditions and religion, also attacked Gouin whom he considered an upstart, and promised that a Conservative candidate would run in every district. For their part, the ALN leaders were suspicious of Duplessis whom they judged to be opportunistic and equivocating, especially in regard to the policy he would apply to the electricity trust, condemned with such vigour by Philippe Hamel. Yet the circumstances were to lead, inevitably, to a marriage of reason between the two opposition groups, a step that neither Gouin nor Duplessis would actively promote.

It seems clear, in retrospect, that the rank and file of both parties pushed their leaders towards an alliance. In spite of the impressive oratorical resources of the ALN and of the parliamentary expertise of the Conservatives, both groups lacked the funds to wage an effective campaign against Taschereau. Finally, a stormy meeting between the main spokesmen for each party, in Duplessis's absence, resulted in an agreement concerning the distribution of electoral districts between Conservatives and ALN candidates as well as the leadership of the new coalition. The agreement specified that, in the next
election, from twenty-five to thirty ridings would be reserved for the Conservatives and some sixty would go to the ALN, and that after victory Maurice Duplessis would become prime minister while Paul Gouin would name the majority of the cabinet. In spite of the ALN’s apparent advantage in the number of districts where its members would run, many candidates of the party were actually Conservatives who believed their chances would be improved under the ALN banner. On 7 November 1935, then, Duplessis and Gouin publicly proclaimed the formation of the “Union Nationale Duplessis-Gouin” in order to present a “united front against the enemy of the people of the province of Quebec: the Taschereau regime.” Its official programme was that of the ALN. In the elections held on November 25, the Liberal government was seriously shaken: forty-eight Liberals were elected compared to forty-two members of the Opposition. Of these latter, sixteen were officially Conservative while twenty-six were members of the ALN.

The events of the following months confirmed Duplessis as sole leader of the Union Nationale. His adversaries have always held that the Conservative leader manoeuvred to undermine Paul Gouin’s position within the Union Nationale so that, once Duplessis became prime minister, he would be able to eliminate the other reform-minded spokesmen of the ALN and, finally, discard the most radical aspects of the programme, particularly the struggle against economic dictatorship. Nevertheless, most observers portray Gouin as an intellectual who lacked leadership qualities and was incapable of dealing with politics on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, it is true that Duplessis attempted to reinforce his position with the members of the ALN. In this regard, the party’s parliamentary secretary later confirmed: “In the minds of our members, in the facts also, it was evident that the only man capable of leading them was Maurice Duplessis.” This leadership was to be demonstrated convincingly at the time of the celebrated hearings of the Public Accounts Committee.

Perhaps it really was just a “tempest in a teapot,” as the jurist Jean-Charles Bonenfant would later affirm; perhaps the so-called scandals of the Taschereau administration were but peccadillos. Still, the committee’s hearings, personally conducted by Maurice Duplessis, provoked immense public interest and discredited the Taschereau regime. Maybe it was not really important that a minister, Irénée Vautrin, donned trousers paid for out of the public purse before setting out on hikes in the woods, but the cry of “Vautrin’s pants” would resound across Quebec during the next election campaign and would contribute to sweeping away the old regime. Opposition members realized that these attacks were taking their toll and Duplessis’s star accordingly rose. It was also evident that Duplessis sought a rupture with Gouin, a break that finally occurred in June 1936. Shortly afterwards, at a meeting of the caucus convened by Duplessis in Sherbrooke, thirty-five of the forty-two opposition
members gave him their support. Duplessis had undeniably become the leader of the Union Nationale.

Events moved quickly in that summer of 1936. Taschereau handed in his resignation as prime minister on June 11 and was replaced by Adélard Godbout. Elections were scheduled for August 17. The Union Nationale programme, as outlined by Maurice Duplessis at the opening of the campaign, maintained its reformist cast. Without going into detail, Duplessis promised to rid the province of the "odious and exploiting trusts;" several of his candidates, led by Hamel and Grégoire, went further and gave priority to this issue. Duplessis also pledged to establish a provincial farm credit system in order to "save agriculture" and stem the flight from the farms to the cities. In addition he promised a number of political reforms that he would never implement, such as a requirement for parties to furnish a list of their contributors, a law on honest elections, and public tenders for contracts awarded by the state. Duplessis also devoted a significant part of his campaign to denouncing the abuses of the Taschereau-Godbout administration and there is no doubt that this issue had an enormous impact on the outcome of the vote. After a bitter struggle, the Union Nationale overwhelmed the Liberals, taking seventy-six seats to the Liberals' fourteen; Adélard Godbout himself, the Liberal leader and prime minister, went down to defeat. The Liberals' popular vote declined from 50.2 per cent in 1935 to 41.8 per cent whereas the Union Nationale increased its proportion from 48.7 per cent to 57.5 per cent. This was indeed a dramatic upset, and there could be no uncertainty that Duplessis and the Union Nationale had won a strong mandate.

II. Duplessis's First Term, 1936-1939

When one compares the Union Nationale's first brief term with its long incumbency after 1944, it is perhaps tempting to see two very different regimes, even two very different prime ministers. The first mandate did end in an electoral hecatomb whereas, after 1944 Duplessis succeeded in consolidating his hold on party and government to such an extent that he was able to win four consecutive elections and, had he lived, there is every reason to believe that he would have won a fifth in 1960. Even allowing that the Union Nationale lacked organization and experience during the years 1936-39 and that a depressed economy worked against it, the resemblances between the two administrations appear quite as striking as the contrasts.

Duplessis rapidly transformed the Union Nationale into a conservative party, undoubtedly with the support of most of his caucus and his organizers who were no more convinced than he was that the government should play a more active role in the economy and society. In truth, what counted was
to gain power, and to hold it. But several well-known reformers, like Hamel, Chaloult, Grégoire, and Oscar Drouin, who favoured unflinching pursuit of nationalist economic policies, quickly broke with Duplessis over his apparent refusal to implement his programme. Their attacks on this “most deceitful of all politicians” — as Hamel described Duplessis — were bitter. Indeed, in 1937 they created a new party, the National party. There is certainly no question that Duplessis indefinitely put off the campaign against the trusts just as he did most of the political reforms he had promised. Chauloult affirmed that Duplessis told him a few weeks after the victory: “A programme is good before the elections and the elections are over now.” But perhaps it is also true, as Mgr. Georges Gauthier, Archbishop of Montreal, opined, that “the population is more interested in the price of milk than in the price of electricity.” And even then Duplessis did succeed in negotiating certain reductions in electricity rates in urban areas.

Relations between government and labour deteriorated rapidly. The Legislature adopted Bills 19 and 20 which exempted public works executed on behalf of the government from the purview of the Fair Wages Act, prohibited the closed shop, and authorized the state to modify collective agreements unilaterally. Then, in August 1937, ten thousand textile mill workers, members of the Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada (CTCC), went on strike with the support of the clergy. The government appeared to side with the employers and William Tremblay, Labour minister, was described as “the assassin of the working class.” Actually, it was not surprising that the unions already found Duplessis quite unaccommodating. Although he promised to defend the worker, the Union Nationale leader had never attempted to court the unions. Things would change little after 1944.

Still, Duplessis did not just stir up opposition during his first term. Other measures taken by the Union Nationale government won him support, especially from the farmers who, once the storm of 1939 had passed, remained staunchly loyal to him. On numerous occasions, Duplessis expounded his fundamentally conservative and ruralist philosophy: “Agriculture is an element of economic stability and social order. We must maintain and protect our rural base.” And he gave tangible expression to such statements by establishing a system of agricultural credit and taking other steps to assist agriculture.

Duplessis’s conservatism also took the form of an unrelenting battle against the supposed communist threat in Quebec. In these years of economic crisis and of epic combats in Europe between the left and the right — civil war broke out in Spain in 1936 — the Catholic clergy increasingly worried over subversive activity in the province. Cardinal J.-M.-Rodrigue Villeneuve declared that communism had become “a reality. The fire is lit among us and
it is urgent to extinguish it since there is little time left.” In October 1936, fifteen thousand faithful, amongst them the cardinal, the mayor of Quebec City, and the new prime minister of the province, launched a crusade against communism at a rally held at the Quebec City coliseum. Then, when the infamous “Padlock Law” was adopted in March 1937, the clergy greeted it enthusiastically and insisted that it be applied rigorously. This campaign would continue throughout Duplessis’s second administration.

Thus, instead of attempting to portray a Duplessis quite different from the one who would take power again in 1944, it would perhaps be more accurate to see a party leader preparing the foundations on which he would base his power after his return to office. Nevertheless, it seems evident that in the course of the years 1936-39, Duplessis did neglect the Union Nationale’s organization, with the result that the party was ill prepared for battle when the prime minister suddenly called an election in the autumn of 1939. Quebec’s public finances were in a sorry state and Ottawa now controlled provincial borrowings. Duplessis intended to campaign on the theme of provincial autonomy, especially fiscal autonomy, and he denounced what he called the federal plan for “assimilation and centralization.” Indeed, the election was fought on a nationalistic issue, but that issue was not provincial autonomy. Military conscription was the theme and the bogey of 1917 returned to haunt the politicians. The Quebec members of the federal cabinet, with Ernest Lapointe in the lead, maintained that Duplessis’s re-election would signify a vote of non-confidence in them and that they would have to resign. And if they left the cabinet, who would stop an Anglophone government from having recourse to conscription once again? Adéland Godbout, provincial Liberal leader, himself promised to resign if a single French Canadian was mobilized against his will by a Liberal administration. Later, Duplessis’s supporters would condemn this blackmail and insist that Quebec had voted out of fear. Nonetheless, a majority of voters judged that Quebec’s federal ministers constituted a better guarantee than Duplessis against the possibility of conscription for service overseas. The results of the election were catastrophic for the Union Nationale which elected only fifteen members to the Liberals’ seventy. Moreover, the Union Nationale’s popular vote fell precipitously from 57.5 per cent in 1936 to 39.2 per cent in 1939.

III. The Union Nationale in Opposition, 1939-1944

Some observers believe that Duplessis’s decision to declare a surprise election in 1939 constituted the “one occasion when he misjudged his own people.” Afterwards, though, Duplessis appeared fortunate in having been defeated since he was able, as Leader of the Opposition, to watch from the sidelines while his dire prophecies on conscription and provincial autonomy
were fulfilled. Indeed, in order to pursue the war effort, the federal government set about centralizing public finances as well as increasing its activities in the economic and social spheres. But even though Duplessis's predictions did come true, one must not conclude that he hoped for defeat in 1939; on the contrary, he seems to have found that setback very bitter.

On the morrow of its debacle, the Union Nationale, like other movements that had grown out of the Depression and disappointed their adherents, seemed destined to oblivion. Duplessis appeared to be no more than a fleeting star in the political heavens — an historical has-been — and a group of conservatives was already seeking to dislodge him from the party leadership. A triumphant English Canada proclaimed that Quebec had voted for national unity and for the war effort. Then, in 1940, the Rowell-Sirois Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations published its report, one of whose recommendations was that the province abandon all direct taxes to Ottawa in return for federal grants and the payment of existing debts. Duplessis had challenged the commission's very mandate when it was created in 1937; he now declared that the report constituted "the apotheosis of the dictatorship of money over the ruins of autonomy, guardian of our most cherished traditions and of our most sacred rights." At a press conference, he reaffirmed Quebec's claim to all revenues accorded by the British North America Act of 1867; Godbout, however, had little choice: in 1942 he would be forced to conclude an agreement on the "rental" of provincial taxes to Ottawa.

In Western Europe, only England still held firm against the Nazi aggressor. In Canada, more and more Anglophones felt their country was not doing its share. Faced with rising pro-conscriptionist sentiment within his own party, W.L.M. King, Canadian prime minister, decided to hold a referendum in which electors would be asked to release the government from its earlier anti-conscriptionist pledges. In Quebec, the Ligue pour la défense du Canada campaigned for the "no" and, in fact, the "no" triumphed easily in the province in the plebiscite of April 1942. By contrast, the rest of Canada voted overwhelmingly "yes." Out of the league evolved the Bloc populaire, an anti-conscriptionist, anti-imperialist, autonomist, and reformist party with federal and provincial wings, the latter led by André Laurendeau. Once again, as in 1935, the opposition was split and Duplessis risked being surpassed by another party more nationalistic than his own. He might well accuse the Bloc of dividing anti-Liberal political forces and thus helping Godbout keep power; this time there would be no anti-government coalition and three separate parties would participate in the provincial elections of 8 August 1944. During the campaign, the Liberals could point to several important though controversial pieces of legislation adopted during their term of office. They had given women the right to vote, made education compulsory for children aged
six to fourteen, passed laws on civil service reform and on labour relations, and nationalized two private electricity companies, Beauharnois and Montreal Light, Heat and Power, “the two cancerous children of forty-four years of Liberal regime,” as Duplessis mocked. The Union Nationale leader accused Godbout of trying to “electrocute the population” in order to hide the real issue of the election: the shameful weakness of the provincial Liberal government in the face of the centralizers from Ottawa. Abandoned by the federal Liberals, the provincial party attempted to convince voters that “to beat Godbout would be to beat King, and to beat King would be to play into the hands of those who wanted conscription.” Yet this issue no longer had the same relevance it had in 1939.

The Liberal and Union Nationale parties waged a close race in 1944 with the Bloc playing the role of nuisance whose presence probably favoured the Union Nationale, particularly in certain rural counties outside of Montreal and in the Eastern Townships. The Liberals did win the largest share of the popular vote, 39.5 per cent, but because of the way in which it was distributed — the party piled up huge majorities in certain English-speaking districts of Montreal — they elected only thirty-seven candidates. The Union Nationale, with 35.8 per cent of the vote, carried forty-eight seats. Already the efforts of the 1936-39 years were paying dividends and the party won a majority of the numerous sparsely populated rural ridings. Maurice Duplessis was again prime minister of Quebec.

IV. The Foundations of Power

By the war’s end, Quebec was no longer what it had been ten years before. The Depression was now only a bad memory and the province was again the scene of rapid industrialization. Stimulated by war needs, the metal and chemical industries, amongst others, underwent prodigious growth; in an unusual occurrence, the value of manufacturing production increased at a faster rate in Quebec than in neighbouring Ontario. Nevertheless, Ontario still had a greater share of high-paying heavy industry while Quebec was well represented in sectors like textiles, dependent on an abundant labour force and paying relatively low wages. Wartime industrial development also stimulated the growth of unions whose membership in Quebec doubled, rising from 105,000 in 1939 to 209,000 in 1946. The CTCC, however, reputed by employers to be less militant, saw its growth slow — its share of unionized workers in the province dropped from 37 per cent in 1936 to only 24.2 per cent in 1946 — while the international unions made rapid progress.

During the decade ending in 1941, the province’s population increased by 16 per cent to a total of 3.3 million; for the years 1941-51, the growth rate
accelerated to nearly 22 per cent. Although the Depression temporarily halted the tide of rural migration, the industrial growth of the 1940s signalled new population losses for the countryside so that, by 1951, more than 67 per cent of Quebeckers inhabited the towns and cities. The agricultural vocation, the traditional attachment of French Canadians to labour in the fields, was becoming little more than a myth: 25.2 per cent of the population derived a living from agriculture in 1941 while by 1951 this figure had dropped to barely 19.5 per cent. Between 1938 and 1947, agricultural production averaged only 12.4 per cent of the net value of goods produced in Quebec. Moreover, many so-called farmers worked off the farm for up to six months a year. Decidedly, the Quebec of Maria Chapdelaine no longer existed.

In the face of such change, it appears paradoxical to maintain that Duplessis’s strength resided in the defence of conservative virtues, such as ruralism, religion, the safeguarding of traditions, and economic laissez-faire, to which large sectors of Quebec society, and certainly the elite, were still attached. The Union Nationale continued to assist farmers, defend the traditional role of the Catholic Church in Quebec and particularly its presence in social and educational institutions, and combat “heretics” — like communists, socialists and Jehovah’s Witnesses. It endeavoured to repulse the federal government’s centralizing assaults in areas like revenue sharing and legislative competency, all in the name of preserving a distinct society. And it favoured social peace in order to attract private investment, create jobs, and assure the province’s economic prosperity. In addition, the party established a highly efficient organization, and both government and party effectively used patronage in order to secure the dependence and indebtedness of at least part of the electorate. The keystone in this structure was Maurice Duplessis himself.

In the agricultural sector, the farm credit system set up during the Union Nationale’s first term was continued: between 1937 and 1955, some fifty thousand farmers profited from the plan. Then, in 1945, Duplessis himself introduced a bill establishing a Rural Electrification Bureau to help co-operatives bring electricity to rural areas. Whereas only 20 per cent of rural properties had access to electricity in 1944, some 90 per cent benefited from the service in 1955.

The support that these undertakings, and others concerning colonization and land improvement, generated in the countryside was disproportionately magnified by constituency boundaries which were increasingly outmoded, as well as unjust for urban dwellers, because they accorded enormous political weight to small rural ridings. For example, in 1956, the ten largest electoral districts in the province contained an average of 70,000 electors each: collectively they sent to the Legislature six Liberals, out of a total of twenty Liberals
who won seats in that year’s election, as well as four members of the Union Nationale. At the other end, the ten smallest ridings, with an average of only 8,500 voters, elected nine Union Nationale candidates. This disequilibrium explains in part the Union Nationale’s stranglehold on the Legislative Assembly, with eighty-two out of ninety-two MLAs in 1948, sixty-eight out of ninety-two in 1952, and seventy-two out of ninety-three in 1956. It should be remembered, however, that, in each of these three elections, the governing party obtained, though barely, an absolute majority of the popular vote. Is it necessary to affirm that the Union Nationale’s support did not come only from rural Quebec, and that even working-class constituencies usually gave a majority of their votes to Duplessis? Indeed, the Union Nationale’s anti-labour policies appear not to have hurt it at election time, possibly because the unions still aroused suspicion among the working class, or because the party redeemed itself in other ways, or simply because there was no alternative. In fact, the only districts where the Union Nationale always did poorly were in the English-speaking areas on the western end of the Island of Montreal.

Most observers of the Duplessis period have underlined the high degree of cooperation between the government and the province’s Catholic clergy. Certainly, after the tension of the Taschereau era, Church-state relations appeared generally harmonious; indeed, certain bishops seem to have believed that a return to power of the Liberals would unleash a wave of secularization. However, in the latter years of the Duplessis regime, relations between certain members of the clergy and the Union Nationale government deteriorated, although both authorities continued to appreciate the advantages of close collaboration. On the one hand, faced with growing financial needs and in the absence of statutory subsidies for social institutions and schools, the clergy was constantly forced to solicit special grants. In return, manifestations of gratitude were de rigueur. In the dioceses established in newly-developed regions, appeals for funds were more pressing as well as more frequent, and expressions of thanks so effusive, that certain bishops, among them Msgr. J.A. Desmarais, Bishop of Amos, actually seemed to behave as though they were agents of the Union Nationale. And the clergy endorsed Duplessis’s campaigns against the communists and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although this repression was vigorously condemned outside the province, Catholics within Quebec generally approved. On the other hand, Duplessis, who had become a model of fiscal orthodoxy after the severe financial problems he had encountered between 1936 and 1939, could not but recognize that institutions run by the clergy saved the public treasury huge sums of money in salaries. All in all, Duplessis and the majority of the clergy, above and beyond their special interests, spoke the same language and shared a common vision of society.
The Liberal opposition, and later the new Liberal government which succeeded the Union Nationale in June 1960, often criticized Duplessis for his negative defence of provincial autonomy and blamed him for refusing federal initiatives and thus costing Quebec’s taxpayers millions of dollars in lost grants. And yet the context of the 1940s and 1950s was very different from that of the early 1960s. In the wake of a disastrous Depression and of a World War that appeared to necessitate the mobilization of the country’s resources, the federal government tried, with considerable success, to centralize fiscal and even legislative powers in Canada. After the war, for social, economic and political reasons, the King and St. Laurent governments continued in the same vein by setting up several new social programmes, by concluding tax-rental agreements with all provinces but Quebec, and by instituting a system of grants to Canadian universities. Duplessis defended the traditional autonomist position and told federal centralizers: “You shall not crucify the province of Quebec, even on a cross of gold.”

In the area of federal-provincial relations for the years 1944-59, two questions stand out in particular: the federal grants to the universities, established in October 1951, and the debate over the provincial income tax instituted by Duplessis in 1954. In the case of the university grants, Duplessis asserted that the project constituted a “dangerous usurpation of power by the federal government, in a sector of activity exclusively reserved to the provinces” and, except for the first year, he refused to accept the subsidies in spite of the growing needs of the province’s university system. Nationalist groups supported him, and even Pierre Elliott Trudeau, habitually a critic of the regime, condemned the federal plan which, he said, did not respect the principle of a clear attribution of responsibility in a federal system. In the second case, the Union Nationale government decided to establish a provincial income tax equal to 15 per cent of the federal tax and claimed full deductibility in order to avoid double-taxing Quebeckers. Nationalists rallied to Duplessis, and Gérard Filion, usually not a friend of the government, approved in Le Devoir: “Quebec is again on the offensive.” Ottawa refused the principle of deductibility, but finally agreed to reduce its own personal income tax by 10 per cent. It is obviously impossible to judge the electoral benefits that Duplessis was able to reap from his autonomist campaigns just as it would be difficult to demonstrate that Duplessis’s positions on the question cost the Union Nationale votes. Still, nationalist groups did support the cause of autonomy, whose standard-bearer was Duplessis, and they castigated the Liberals for not giving sufficient guarantees on the issue.

In economic matters, however, nationalist values assuredly had little impact upon the regime’s policies. In fact, critics denounced the flagrant contradiction between the political nationalism that Duplessis practised so zealously and
the enormous concessions he granted in order to attract foreign investors. Vast tracts of Crown lands, especially in Northern Quebec, were ceded to American corporations, royalties were fixed at levels decried by the Liberals as scandalously generous for the companies, and numerous tax concessions were accorded. In addition, the province’s financial health made it possible to keep taxes relatively low. As far as labour was concerned, the government sought, through its laws and their application, to favour “social peace.” The controls it imposed explain in part why between 1945 and 1959 Quebec had an average of only thirty-five strikes a year with a loss of 335,000 man-days of work, compared to Ontario’s average yearly losses of 700,000 man-days. Thanks to a climate of economic prosperity, in Quebec as well as internationally, development capital flowed into the primary and secondary sectors.

The question of Quebec’s economic development in this period has aroused considerable debate. There is no doubt that the province’s economy did grow rapidly and it is possible to use all manner of statistics to make a convincing demonstration. But it seems that the gap that existed in 1939 between Quebec and Ontario, in regard to the economic performance of the two provinces, persisted in Ontario’s favour throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, it should be noted that, although the number of jobs increased in all sectors, the increase was more important in the tertiary sector, particularly transportation, commerce, and services, than in the resource and manufacturing sectors. But in spite of certain structural weaknesses, the rapid economic development of the period reinforced the position of the governing party and contributed to attenuating the effects of anti-government criticism. In marked contrast with the tension that characterized relations between government and the unions, ties with business remained cordial.

Maurice Duplessis’s conservatism surely pleased large and influential fractions of the Quebec population. But one should not minimize the role of political organization and patronage in securing votes for the Union Nationale. From 1944, Joseph-D. Bégin, Minister of Colonization, supervised the party machine, while Gérard Martineau, named to the Legislative Council, occupied the position of party treasurer after 1946. Those who “donated” to the party treasury were, in the main, the businesses and commercial establishments of the province. The government would grant contracts for roadworks, without tenders, to party contributors. Patronage became an instrument of blackmail, even of intimidation, a veritable octopus whose tentacles extended to all areas of provincial administration. In the words of Jean Lesage, Liberal leader after 1958, “everyone got something, even the voter who on the eve of the election, received a load of gravel to spread on the mud in the entry to his farm.” And the manna could evaporate if the voters preferred the opposition candidate. Duplessis himself stated at a political rally in Verchères in 1952: “I
warned you in 1948 not to vote for the Liberal candidate. You didn’t listen to me. Unfortunately your county did not receive the grants, the subsidies that would have made it happier. I hope that the lesson will suffice.” Alas! The voters’ obstinacy lasted through one more election and it was only in 1956 that the Union Nationale candidate would be elected. As the years went by, traditional politics, where patronage on an individual as well as on a collective level played no small role, would be criticized by an ever more vocal minority of voters. Nonetheless, it seems apparent that patronage as practised by the Union Nationale contributed to obtaining the support of those whom it benefited.

V. Duplessism Challenged

The electoral support accorded to the Union Nationale remained remarkably stable between 1948 and 1956. Even in the 1960 election, after the deaths of both Duplessis and his successor, Paul Sauvé, and at a time when the third Union Nationale leader in less than a year, Antonio Barrette, was facing bitter dissension within the party, the Union Nationale lost only 5 per cent of the popular vote. At the same time, the Liberals, with a dynamic new leader, vaunted their “équipe du tonnerre” and proposed a programme of reform symbolized by their slogan: “It’s time for a change!” There is no doubt that Duplessis’s critics became more numerous and more vocal in the last years of the regime, but their impact on the electoral base of the Union Nationale seems to have been relatively slight. Perhaps the strong opposition to which Duplessis was constantly subjected by intellectuals explains a tendency, for commentators close to this milieu, to exaggerate the significance of such anti-Duplessis groups.

When he wished to boast of the power he wielded, Duplessis would often declare that “the bishops eat out of my hand.” In spite of much evidence of close cooperation between the Church and the Union Nationale government, as already discussed, there were discordant notes. The clergy’s attitude at the time of the famous asbestos strike of 1949 — the bishops went so far as to order that collections be taken up for strikers’ families — certainly displeased Duplessis. When Msgr. Joseph Charbonneau, Archbishop of Montreal and a fervent defender of the workers, resigned a few months later, some saw Duplessis’s vengeful hand at work; later research would seem to show that other reasons explain the archbishop’s departure. Msgr. Charbonneau’s successor, Msgr. Paul-Émile Léger, maintained proper relations with the government, but was not in the habit of coming to Quebec City to beg for funds. Other priests, acting individually, also criticized Duplessis. In particular, there were the cases of Father Georges-Henri Lévesque of Laval University, and Fathers Gérard Dion and Louis O’Neill, authors of a text which appeared in August 1956 denouncing political corruption in Quebec.
But it was in the unions that the regime’s most steadfast opponents were to be found, even though certain labour organizations, like the Fédération provinciale du Travail du Québec (FPTQ), sought to collaborate with the government in return for favours. In 1949, Duplessis attempted to place drastic curbs on the unions through his Bill 5 which prohibited the closed shop and specified the conditions under which the right to strike could be exercised. The proposed legislation also went so far as to stipulate that any union permitting “communists” to occupy posts in its organization or on its executive would lose the certificate it held from the Board of Labour Relations and thus its right to negotiate with the employer. The unions fought the legislation bitterly and the Church also condemned the bill; although Duplessis withdrew it, he did eventually succeed in passing many of its components in piecemeal fashion, notably through Bills 19 and 20 that the Legislature adopted in 1954, both retroactive to 1944. The CTCC, that had become much more militant after the asbestos strike and a series of other bitter confrontations in 1952 in which police were frequently used against strikers, joined with the Fédération des Unions industrielles du Québec to combat the legislation. The FPTQ and the FUIQ united in 1957 to form the Fédération du Travail du Québec which would conduct the interminable strike staged that same year at Murdochville.

The Duplessis regime was also under attack by a growing minority of intellectuals. Amongst the opponents stood out the Montreal daily, Le Devoir; the small review, Cité Libre, guided by Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Gérard Pelletier; the magazine, Relations, published by the Jesuits; and, in the universities, Laval’s Faculty of Social Sciences. Of course, these critics constantly censured the Union Nationale’s electoral corruption, the abuses of the patronage system, and the scandals, like the natural gas scandal of 1958, in which the administration was involved. But they went further since, in their eyes, the Quebec of the 1950s lagged seriously behind the other Canadian provinces, particularly in regard to the role that the state should play in a modern society. These intellectuals denounced the social conservatism inherent in the doctrine of provincial autonomy as defended by Duplessis. They were not anticlerical, but they did believe that the state should be more concerned with education and social welfare, then largely under the control of the Catholic clergy. Regarding education in particular, curricula had to be revised, teacher-training improved, and rates of school attendance increased. Cité Libre even took the rather revolutionary step of asserting that a Department of Education should be established. In the economic sector, Le Devoir maintained that the government should stop allying itself with the employers in oppressing workers and that it should impose much more drastic conditions on foreign investors whose profits from the exploitation of the province’s natural resources were judged to be excessive. But in order to accomplish these reforms, the Quebec state would need an
expanded civil service based on competence rather than allegiance to the party in power. Nonetheless, the opposition was divided and many of the Union Nationale’s critics felt ill at ease with Lapalme’s Liberals whom they viewed as still too much under the control of the old guard. Only a new leader with a revised programme could bring these diverse elements together into an anti-Duplessis front. In effect, that is precisely what occurred with the arrival of Jean Lesage in 1958.

Maurice Duplessis died suddenly on 7 September 1959. Brandishing his slogan “Henceforth,” the new leader and prime minister, Paul Sauvé, gave the impression that Duplessism was no more but, before he could make his mark on the province, death struck him down too in early January 1960. The Union Nationale caucus finally designated Antonio Barrette as his successor, but Barrette was not accepted by certain elements of the party machine. On 22 June 1960, the Union Nationale was defeated, though barely, by Lesage’s Liberals and Quebec embarked upon the period later termed the “Quiet Revolution.” The new government took control of most institutions in the spheres of education, health, and welfare; it adopted a new labour code; it favoured a certain economic nationalism; it pursued an aggressive autonomist policy in relations with Ottawa; and it fought to curb patronage and eliminate political corruption.

In this atmosphere of enthusiasm and energetic action, the Liberals and their sympathizers were inclined to judge the Duplessis years harshly as a period of obscurity akin to the Dark Ages. Their arrival in power, they felt, heralded a sort of rebirth, a thaw, the beginning of a new era. The Duplessis regime may well have endured for too long, the Union Nationale leader’s traditionalist policies may well have been anachronistic when compared with the relatively modern society that, in many respects, the Quebec of the 1950s had already become. It is also possible that the Liberals and their reform-minded team, entrusted with power in 1960, had little choice but to act with haste on all levels in order to move Quebec forward. However, the supporters of the new government did not enjoy the benefits of hindsight necessary to analyze the old regime with a certain impartiality. In addition, they could scarcely anticipate the weaknesses of the reforms that they were in the process of implementing.

Duplessis and his regime will continue to fascinate observers of Quebec society and research will be pursued as new sources of information become available and new monographs are written. Freed to a large extent of the partisan constraints so present during these last years, they will undoubtedly be able to shed new light on this complex period of Quebec’s history.

