

Rectifying the misrepresentation of Alliance Quebec

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Once again, the English-speaking people of Quebec are divided on how to defend their vital interests against aggressive restrictive nationalism. Eight organizations, former members of the Quebec Community Groups Network, recently signed an open letter explaining “Why we left QCGN.”

I’ll not express an opinion on the validity of their disagreement with the QCGN. But I do want to correct the historical record about this statement from their open letter:

The QCGN was founded nearly 25 years ago, in part to fill a void left by Alliance Quebec (AQ), which, as the largest and most prominent organization representing English-speaking communities at the time, had lost the confidence of its members. AQ was no longer seen as representative of, nor responsive to, its members.

In 1998, I was the national columnist for the Montreal Gazette. But I decided to run for the presidency of AQ because of my conviction that the official leaders of the English-speaking community had no understanding of the requirements of the rule of law in a liberal democracy and were endangering the country. During the referendum on unilateral secession held in 1995 by Premier Jacques Parizeau, AQ never raised the issue of its unconstitutionality. Moreover, the Gazette’s editorial page editor, Joan Fraser, defended Parizeau’s proposal for unilateral secession and denounced as “the lunatic fringe” all those who, like me, insisted that secession could only be carried out by an amendment to the constitution. I also insisted that the aboriginals could not be taken hostage against their will by a seceding Quebec.

So, on March 5, 1998, I announced my candidacy for the presidency of AQ. It constituted a hostile takeover, resisted by all the components of AQ. I ran on six principles, of which here, in part, are three:

First Principle: English is one of the two official languages of Quebec. [The then president of Alliance Quebec denied that English was an official language.]

Third Principle: The rule of law is not negotiable. Overthrowing the constitution is not negotiable. [...] If a Quebec government should attempt a coup d’état, a revolution, then we must resist, resist peacefully but effectively.

Fourth Principle: The right to self-determination applies to all, or it applies to none. The federal government has said it will not hold Quebecers within the union against their clearly expressed will. We English-speaking Quebecers must require the symmetrical guarantee that we will not be hijacked into secession against our will. Our federal government has a responsibility towards the Canadian people of Quebec and all first nations, including the Crees, the Inuit, the Montagnais and the Mohawks, not to allow the use of force to imprison us in a secessionist Quebec.

I then uttered this call to action: “For the past 11 years, the English-speaking community has been diluted and dispersed, confused, nearly invisible, frightened and weak. But the time for disunity, confusion and weakness is over. The time has come for decisive leadership, conviction, clear ideas, and collective strength.”

Both AQ and the Gazette were shocked and strongly disapproved. Nevertheless, I won the presidency in May 1998. And, five months later, on August 20, 1998, the Supreme Court of Canada delivered its decision in reply to the reference on Quebec’s secession. The court declared unanimously that Quebec’s secession would constitute a revolution unless it was preceded by an enabling amendment passed according to the Constitution Act, 1982. In addition, the court made clear that such an amendment must be preceded by a negotiated agreement that respected the rights of Quebec’s aboriginal nations. The boundaries of a seceding Quebec would be part of such negotiations.

That Supreme Court decision demonstrated how dangerously wrong had been Alliance Quebec and Joan Fraser’s Gazette during and after the 1995 referendum. My positions were confirmed as according with the rule of law. But neither the former leaders of AQ nor the Gazette have ever recognized how dangerously mistaken they were and how they blatantly failed the country at a crucial moment in our history.