

The Maurice Duplessis legacy

How we recall 'Le Chef'

BY MARIAN SCOTT, THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 5, 2009



Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis in May 1956.

Photograph by: The Gazette, file photo

MONTREAL – "Je me souviens." I remember. So say our licence plates. But how much do we recall, really, of the era when Premier Maurice Duplessis ruled Quebec with an iron fist and a conspiratorial wink to big capital and the Roman Catholic hierarchy? Fifty years ago on Monday, Le Chef - premier from 1936 to 1959, except for a Liberal interregnum from 1939-1944 - died in office at age 69. The following year, Liberal Jean Lesage's Équipe de Tonnerre (team of thunder) rode to victory on the slogan: "It's time for a change."

The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s wrested education and social services from the hands of the Catholic clergy, nationalized electricity, founded state-owned mining, forestry and energy companies and created the Quebec Pension Plan. Churches emptied, the birth rate plummeted and La Grande Noirceur - as critics later dubbed the Duplessis years - was over.

Today's secular, multicultural Quebec seems worlds away from Duplessis's Belle Province - a time of large families and small farms, when nuns in medieval habits ran schools and hospitals, and village curés urged the faithful to vote "bleu" - the colour of the conservative Union Nationale. "Hell is red, while heaven is blue," often quipped Duplessis, a skilled orator whose speeches, peppered with puns, touted rural values and castigated communists.

That past seems so distant. Yet for many, Duplessis's shadow still looms large. Some remember him as a corrupt politician whose infamous Padlock Law and persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses rode roughshod over civil rights.

Others recall the staunch defender of Quebec autonomy who gave Quebec its official fleur-de-lys flag in 1948 and instituted separate provincial income tax in 1952.

"In most people's minds, Duplessis was a conservative who was responsible for preventing Quebec from keeping up with the times," says Jacques Rouillard, a professor of history at the Université de Montréal. "It was a dark period, a negative time, a period to which we would not want to return."

Padlock Law and the Roncarelli Case

The 1937 Padlock Law gave police powers to lock up any premises used to promote communism. In 1957, the Supreme Court struck down the law, which denied presumption of innocence and freedom of expression.

Communists were not Duplessis's only targets. Police also rounded up hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses for distributing leaflets. Frank Roncarelli, the owner of an upscale Crescent St. Italian restaurant who was also a Witness, posted bail for those arrested. In response, Duplessis yanked Roncarelli's liquor licence in December 1946.

After six months, his business ruined, Roncarelli sold the restaurant. He sued Duplessis and won the case in a 1959 landmark ruling, by the Supreme Court of Canada, which awarded the former restaurateur \$33,000 plus interest.

Lawyer Alan Stein, 72, is the son of lawyer Albert Louis Stein, who represented Roncarelli with McGill law professor Frank Scott:

My father was a David against Goliath. His mother ran a dry-goods store on Hutchison Ave. The family lived upstairs. My father ran a dress business with his brother and he studied law at the Université de Montréal at the same time.

He loved the law. He used to work day and night. He was tough. It was his cross-examination of Duplessis that won the Roncarelli case. My father kept on coming back to the same question: "Did you give the order to cancel the liquor licence?" Duplessis wouldn't give a direct answer. Finally, Duplessis was so upset he said, "Oui, c'est moi qui a donné l'ordre."

That answer won the case. Duplessis gave the order, so the Supreme Court said he was responsible.

My father tried to engage learned counsel from the big law firms to act with him.

Every one of them turned him down. Frank Scott was the only one who would agree.



Scott taught me constitutional law. I was in his class on the day of the ruling. Scott got an urgent call. He went to his office to take it. He got on the phone and my father gave him the wonderful news.

He came back into the class all smiling. He said, "We've won, 6 to 3." He asked one of the students to get a bottle of champagne. He raised the bottle and said, "Mum's the word!"

Later, Scott had a party at his house on Victoria Ave. All kinds of people came. (Future prime minister) Pierre Elliott Trudeau was there. So was Maxwell Cohen, the dean of the McGill law school.

A common touch

With lively brown eyes and a well-worn pun for every occasion, Duplessis was a consummate political organizer. Some have seen echoes of his folksy manner in former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Action Démocratique founder Mario Dumont.

René Ferron, a retired television producer and Internet radio broadcaster from Duplessis's hometown of Trois Rivières, remembers:

My father was a friend of Duplessis. Every year, he would come to my school, the Séminaire de Trois-Rivières, which was his alma mater.

He always made the same jokes, like "Education is like alcohol: some people just can't handle it," and "The Union Nationale helps those who help themselves."

Duplessis was the most honest man in the world compared to politicians today. He would give someone \$10 to buy a refrigerator. It's small potatoes compared to what goes on now.

Duplessis appointed my father as superintendent of public instruction. He also named him to a committee in charge of maintaining roads in winter. When my father complained to Duplessis that the committee never actually did anything, Duplessis told him not to worry. In those days, rural roads weren't cleared in winter. People got around by sleigh. Just like now, committees were a way to keep people quiet.

Duplessis had a gift for disarming his critics. He was a man of the people. He always started his speeches with a joke. Unlike (former premiers Louis-Alexandre) Taschereau and (Adélard) Godbout, he didn't play the aristocrat.

He had an incredible memory. He remembered my mother's maiden name. He could scan a document rapidly and absorb it. He was a superior being.

He wasn't perfect. But it was another era. He did many good things for Quebec.

1949 Asbestos Strike

At midnight on Feb. 14, 1949, 5,000 asbestos miners in the Eastern Townships walked off the job. The strike would become a rallying cry for opponents of the Duplessis regime. Led by Jean Marchand, whose long association with Trudeau began during the strike, the union demanded a wage increase of 15 cents per hour; measures to eliminate asbestos dust; pay for overtime and holidays; and the Rand formula, under which the employer deducts union dues from wages. Duplessis dispatched provincial police, who broke up picket lines and beat strikers. Many members of the clergy supported the strikers, including Montreal archbishop Joseph Charbonneau, who resigned afterward. On July 1, the strike ended, with few gains for the workers.

Benoît Côté, 87, is a retired asbestos miner living in Thetford Mines:

I started at the Bell Mine on Jan. 5, 1939. I was 16 years old. My starting salary was \$2 a day. I was one of five brothers who worked in the mine. My father worked there for 54 years.

A month before I started, on Dec. 7, 1938, there was an accident. Sixteen men were buried. Seven died. It took 21/2 days to dig them out.

I had many close calls myself, but I was always lucky.

In October 1940, I went to work in the pit. I made 40 cents an hour.

We worked six days a week, eight hours a day in summer and 10 hours a day in winter. The union dues were 25 cents a month.

We were in a different union from the other mines. We went on strike in 1949, but we were not out as long as long as the other mines.

The miners didn't like Duplessis one bit. He thought that we were paid well enough already. He said if we made too much money, we'd spend it on beer. The Duplessis regime was a reign of terror.

A lot of people got asbestosis. There was so much dust. In the morning, you opened the window and the dust came into the house. In our family, nobody got sick. But there were others who died of it, including some of our neighbours.

Working conditions improved 100 per cent in later years.

Le Chef and the press

The mainstream media had a cosy relationship with Duplessis, whose weekly press conferences were known as the Friday monologue. Asking questions was ... out of the question. Duplessis, a close friend of the publishers of both The Gazette and the Montreal Star, kept a lid on the price of newsprint. In return, the papers printed favourable coverage.

Former Gazette staffers tell tales of envelopes of money - even cars - Duplessis awarded to political reporters.

Only Le Devoir - and the spunky tabloid the Montreal Herald, in the Roncarelli case - dared to criticize Duplessis.

In 1958, Pierre Laporte, then le Devoir's Quebec correspondent, (later a provincial cabinet minister murdered in the 1970 October crisis) broke a story of insider trading by several provincial ministers in a newly privatized natural gas company. Duplessis suspended his weekly press conference. Two weeks later, with Laporte on vacation, Duplessis reinstated the Friday rencontre with the press. But he didn't bargain for the presence of a substitute Le Devoir reporter, then 23 years old.

Guy Lamarche, now 74, recalls:

They told me, "Hey kid: you're going to cover Mr. Duplessis's press conference.

I wasn't a political reporter. I covered the universities and stories about dogs getting run over.

I went to Quebec City. Duplessis always invited the reporters into his office one by one. When I walked in, he asked: "Who do you represent?"

I said: "You don't know me, Mr. Duplessis. I'm Guy Lamarche of Le Devoir."

Duplessis's expression changed. He shouted: "Out! Now!"

A big, burly guard dragged me outside.

The other journalists were watching it like a story unfolding, taking notes. The next day, most of the newspapers ignored the story.

My eviction was the spark that led André Laurendeau to write an editorial in Le Devoir. Laurendeau was trying to understand why the Anglophones remained silent while Duplessis abused civil rights. He compared Duplessis to the king of a colonized country. The colonial rulers tolerate the king, despite his brutality, because he is useful to them.

Another time, Duplessis gave a speech in Montreal. Afterward, I was in the entranceway with the other journalists. A big burly fellow showed up. He put a hand into his vest pocket and looked around. He said: "So, Le Devoir isn't here? "

I said, "In one minute, Le Devoir won't be here."

I walked away, but I kept watching. I saw him hand out envelopes of cash to the reporters.

Journalists were all very badly paid at the time. There was a kind of resignation about accepting payments.

In 1960, I covered the Quebec election in Montreal-Laurier riding for La Presse. René Lévesque was running for the Liberals.

Duplessis was dead. But the Union Nationale machine was still operating in Montreal-Laurier on June 22, 1960.

The Montreal police arrested six members of the provincial liquor police. Their pockets were stuffed with ballots.

They were arrested on the orders of (Mayor) Jean Drapeau.

If they hadn't been arrested, Lévesque would not have won. It changed history.

'Électeurs, électrices, électricité!'

That was one of Duplessis's favourite lines when speaking in rural ridings. His campaign of connecting villages and farms to the grid was one of the UN premier's most popular policies - ensuring the continued support of rural Quebecers, his most faithful constituency.

Duplessis's conservative, agrarian philosophy glorified the values of faith, family and farm. A third of Quebecers lived in rural areas in 1951, compared to 25 per cent today.

From 1945 to 1955, the proportion of farms with electricity increased from 19 per cent to 90 per cent.

Jacques Croteau, 89, of St. Fortunat, two hours east of Montreal, remembers when the lights came on:

We got electricity in 1947. On the range roads, it took another few years.

It was a big change. Before that, there was no refrigerator, no electric stove, no lights. It completely changed your life.

In the old days, you used to look at the stars. You would see signs in the sky.

Everything was done with horses. Nobody had a car.

I went up to third grade. Once you knew the catechism, you had enough education.

People always voted for the same party in those days. When a family was blue, everyone in the family voted blue. When a family was red, they voted red. We were blue, but we weren't very partisan. If Duplessis hadn't been there, it would have been someone similar.

Since those days, I've voted for all kinds of parties.

When I was growing up we had six cows. We had 50 acres of land.

From about 1954, you couldn't get by with just six cows. I did other jobs off the farm. There were men who repaired the roads for the Department of Transportation. When the party changed, it was a different bunch who maintained the roads. There was a lot of patronage in those days.

Artists' Manifesto

In the 1940s, a group of young artists felt stifled by Quebec's pious conformity. Books on contemporary art were banned from libraries and the École des Beaux Arts clung to classical traditions. In 1948, Paul-Émile Borduas and 15 others signed a manifesto called Le Refus Global (Total Refusal). It criticized a Quebec society "huddled to the skirts of a priesthood" and called for freedom from convention.

Artist Françoise Sullivan, 84, remembers:

Among intellectuals and artists there was a very great discontent with Maurice Duplessis's very narrow-minded attitude. There was no freedom. It was like a fascist regime. We were very young and full of enthusiasm. But everything around us felt very dead, conventional and boring. We had to make a gesture. We had to show the world.

The hardest thing about signing the Refus Global was thinking about my parents. I knew I was hurting them. But I felt, "I cannot deny this." I had to do it.

When Borduas writes, "Make place for magic! Make place for love!" that was for everyone. We wanted everyone to be up to their capacities. When people are not, it makes for a very frustrated life. It was really a generous move, but it wasn't taken as that.

When the Refus Global came out, it had the effect of a bomb. Duplessis saw to it that Borduas lost his job, saying he wasn't (fit) to teach young people. All of a sudden, he had no income. It was terrible.

He was left with nothing, so he went to New York.

Yesterday, I said to my son, "Did you know that Duplessis died on the 7th of September?"

He said, "We shouldn't talk against the dead. Duplessis's gone.

"Good."

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Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis in May 1956.

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