
The Rise and Fall of the Parti Acadien

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The Parti Acadien was born in the northeast region of New Brunswick. Against the backdrop of socio-economic, language and cultural struggles against the effects of the Equal Opportunities program of the Robichaud government, regional development policies and the language policy that followed the Laurendeau-Dunton Report, the Acadian nationalist movement was restructured, its leadership was rejuvenated and the Parti Acadien was born.

A Committee of Seven was established in January 1971, made up of five professors and two public servants. The committee proposed that a party be formed, and in support of this proposal wrote a manifesto. In May 1971, a group of dissidents raised the question at the annual meeting of the *Société Nationale des Acadiens* of the need to have a political tool that would truly represent the interests of Acadiens. Following discussion with the Committee of Seven, this group abandoned its idea of creating a movement, and decided to put its efforts into publishing the magazine *l'Acayen*, which first appeared in 1972.

For its part, the Committee of Seven organized public meetings, which culminated in February 1972 in the election of an interim committee responsible for drafting a constitution and starting work on grassroots mobilization in order to hold a founding convention. The first manifesto of the Parti Acadien appeared in May 1972, and the following November a convention marked the official birth of the party. Euclide Chiasson, a professor at Bathurst College, was elected president.

The birth of the Parti acadien was marked, from the very beginning by a rejection of Maritime Union and traditional political parties. Its goal was to elect members to the

legislature in Fredericton who would work in the interests of the Acadian population. The Party committed itself to decentralization, relying on local and regional structures (the regions in question being the northeast, southeast and northwest, where the Acadian population was concentrated), with a provincial structure at the top to be composed of the general membership, a council and an executive.

The creation of a political party whose aim was to represent Acadians on a provincial scale occurred at precisely the same moment as the Acadian nationalist movement, which until then had crossed Maritime borders, was dividing along provincial lines. This tendency took shape both under pressure from the federal government, which was pushing for provincial cultural associations in order to deliver grant funding to minorities, and discontentment of the members of the *Société nationale des Acadiens*, a majority of whom were New Brunswick residents and who sought to create an association designed specifically for Acadians in New Brunswick. The *Société Acadienne du Nouveau-Brunswick* was officially founded in June 1972. Its creation represented the wish of the neo-nationalists to dislodge the traditional elites within the nationalist movement. Nonetheless, the new organization was more and more under the thumb of the federal government, which provided the largest portion of its funding.

Despite these difficulties, the creation of the Parti Acadien and the SANB in 1972 symbolized the rise of a new Acadian leadership. Some saw it as the emergence of a new elite, others a home for neo-intellectuals and others as a new petite bourgeoisie. In effect, the distinguishing feature of these two new institutions lay in the fact that a majority of their membership belonged to a new class, which had arisen in the expanding sectors of economic activity in the public and para-public services. Alongside these new political activists, both moderate and radical, stood the old guard, in a fragmented version of the clerical elite whose influence, while diminished, continued to be felt. We should also note that since the 1950s there had

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grown up a class of Acadian capital owners, whose dependant position in the economy moved them to try to find a place in the sun. Since 1963 they had been organized under the aegis of the *Conseil Economique Acadien*. Among all the segments of Acadian society, they are the ones who have historically maintained the closest ties with the federal and provincial Liberal parties, as well as having substantial connections with the provincial Conservative party during the 1970s.

This scenario provided the backdrop for inevitable polarization within the Acadian nationalist movement.

The Ideology of the Parti Acadien: The Issues Between 1972 and 1977

The Parti Acadien was beset from the outset by thorny debate on the merits of electoral politics, socialism, nationalism and social reformism. The dominant tendency within the Party until 1975 was to put the organization forward as a non-electoral party, promoting political education. It even hesitated to adopt a nationalist label.

The party had to come to grips with its own contradictions, as was noted by Roger Ouellet. While it opposed traditional nationalism, of an essentially legal and cultural nature, it sought to reconstruct a model of society which would reconcile nationalist and social concerns, opting for the socialist model. The manifesto of the Parti Acadien, however, espoused a utopian, agrarian variety of socialism.

The Party believed that before putting forward any demands for its own territory it was important to gain economic, social and political power. The populist, reformist tendency could be seen both within the Parti Acadien and in the pages of *l'Acayen* which, although independent of the party, was a vehicle for essentially the same ideology.

The reformist nature of the party was evident in the fact that it wanted to work within the established system. It accepted the parliamentary system and liberal democracy, and supported neither violence nor subversion. It wanted to represent Acadians working for French-speaking New Brunswickers, but not against their English-speaking counterparts. Nevertheless, it felt that the capitalist system, including both the English-speaking bourgeoisie and the Acadian elites, exploited Acadians. Union organizing and corporate development were proposed as solutions that would allow Acadians to regain control of their resources and escape from exploitation and poverty.

Like the traditional elites of the 1930s, the parti put forward a cooperative model. The manifesto contains a vague plan for rural development based on a system of planned villages aspiring to self-sufficiency through the organization of a system of cooperatives of producers and consumers. The plan was reminiscent, of the Fourierist utopia of the XIXth century, but at the same time was

inspired by the route mapped out by Fr. Coady, who was the ideological leader of the cooperative movement in the Maritimes during the 1930s and exerted a considerable influence.



The Parti Acadien could make little headway against the Government of Richard Hatfield

The party considered a possible alliance with the NDP. It even toyed with a proposed merger, and during the 1974 election it decided to encourage voters to vote for the NDP in ridings where there was no Parti Acadien candidate.

The Parti Acadien fielded thirteen candidates in that election, they obtained 1.2% of the popular vote province-wide, but 7% in the ridings where there were candidates. (Four candidates of the Canada Party, in its first foray onto the provincial scene, received 1.5% of the popular vote, an indication of the anglophone backlash in the southern region of the province.) The platform of the Parti Acadien dealt largely with socio-economic issues. The party's demands in the cultural and language spheres were barely greater than those of the SANB: a dual system in the Department of Education, proclamation of the final sections of the *Official Languages Act* and establishment of bilingual services in provincial and municipal government services.

At the 1975 convention the party elected a new leader, J. P. Lantaigne, whose priority was organization: a full-time staffed office accompanied by an information newsletter. It decided against merger with the NDP although the Parti Acadien affirmed its position on the left, stating that any nationalist demands must be secondary to socialist demands and that territorial demands could only be realized

by the liberation of both Acadian and English-speaking workers.

In 1976 a conflict broke out between those who held to the socialist option and those who favoured territorial independence. The struggles between these tendencies reflected the situation in Quebec. When the Parti Québécois came to power in 1976 the future of Acadians in the event of the Quebec separation from the rest of Canada came to the forefront. Many Parti Acadien activists were in close contact with activists in the Parti Québécois and sought their support. At the same time, activists with *l'Acayen* were close to those in the APLQ made up of factions that had left the Parti Québécois because of disagreement over whether to give priority to the struggle for socialism or Quebec independence.

These ideological conflicts had serious repercussions within the Parti Acadien. On the eve of the 1977 policy convention, five members of the executive resigned, and were followed by other activists. The issue was criticism of the policy orientation of the Parti Acadien, which they considered populist, reformist and social democratic, and accused of being under the influence of bourgeois nationalism.

The Ideological Turning Point

The 1977 convention confirmed the social democratic essence of the Parti Acadien. For the first time, the party presented itself explicitly as the representative of the Acadian nation, that is, of all classes without exclusion. It thus invited into its ranks all francophones for whom it was important that the Acadian people of New Brunswick control all the essential aspects of their destiny.

The similarity of this approach to that of the Parti Québécois is evident. But the Parti Acadien did not want to trail along behind the Parti Québécois, and took an independent road in the circumstances. Its analysis was based on two factors: the risk of possible dismemberment of Confederation posed by the Parti Québécois' sovereignty option, and the manoeuvres of the Maritime provinces toward laying the basis of a Maritime Union. As a result, the Parti Acadien believed it was of primary importance for the Acadian people to ensure their own survival by working toward self-determination. Criticizing the approach of advancing the concept of territorial sovereignty as self-evident before it had even been claimed, the Parti Acadien stated that its nationalist goal would not be the creation of an Acadian province.

The issue for Acadian neo-nationalists beginning in 1977 was then purely and simply to forge an alliance of all classes uniting the Acadian nation. The party encountered a number of difficulties in gaining recognition as the representative speaking on behalf of the Acadian people. These problems were particularly obvious in relations with the SANB.

Following the Parti Québécois' rise to power, the constitutional debate became the priority of the SANB. Its discussions with the other provincial associations of francophones in the *Fédération des Francophones hors Québec*, of which it had been a member since 1975, had dealt with the consequences of the patriation of the Canadian Constitution. At its annual general meeting in 1977, the SANB was given a mandate to organize the *Etats Généraux*, the objective of which would be to debate the political future of the Acadians of New Brunswick. On April 28, 1977, the president of the Parti Acadien stated that the Party alone could renegotiate Confederation in the name of the Acadians of New Brunswick. The old parties did not represent Acadians, nor could the SANB negotiate their political future. The following December 7, the Party published an advertisement in *l'Évangéline* promoting the concept of an Acadian province at the *Etats Généraux*. From that point on, the debate became bitter; representatives of the traditional parties were afraid that the *Etats Généraux* would be infiltrated by members of the Parti Acadien.

The SANB was increasingly accused of being in the pocket of the Parti Acadien, particularly because its new president, Donatien Gaudet, was suspected of having obtained his the position because of his sympathies with the Parti Acadien. Gaudet confirmed these rumours when he resigned as president of the SANB in September 1978 and decided to canvass for the Parti Acadien.

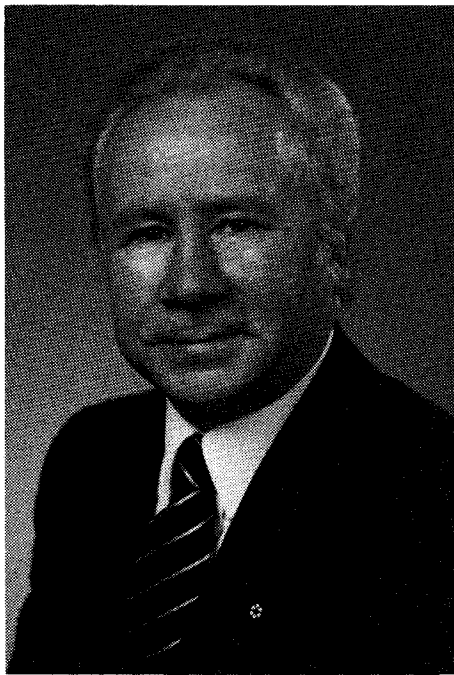
The debates leading up to the 1978 election had repercussions on the election platforms of the traditional parties, particularly that of the Conservatives. While they boasted of having proclaimed the final sections of the *Official Languages Act*, the Conservatives felt it necessary to put forward more concrete promises, like building a French-language community college in the southeast and establishing a French-language agricultural institute.

The platform of the Parti Acadien was its still very general and ill-defined goal of the creation of an Acadian province. Twenty-three candidates received 12% of the vote in the ridings where they ran, and 4% province-wide. The party had tripled its share of the vote over the previous election.

Between the 1978 election and the April 1979 convention, the Parti Acadien attempted to clarify its platform and respond to objections raised about the viability of an Acadian province. At the convention, two documents were adopted: *La province acadienne, dimension politique*, and *Regard sur l'économie du territoire acadien*. While the basic premise was that Acadians should be a majority in a recognized territory, in the short term, the party favoured the creation of French-language administrative units throughout the public service, and at the same time decentralization of government powers and devolution to the Acadian regions. Donatien Gaudet was elected president, and several months later, in October 1979, the national policy convention organized by the SANB was held.

National Policy Convention

The objective of this convention was to discuss the political future of the Acadians and to define a collective direction. It was preceded by establishment of committees with the mandate of selecting participants according to criteria for ensuring a representative gathering. The aim was to recruit 1% of the Acadian population 15 years old and older, using criteria of geography, sex, age and occupation. While the convention was to be representative, it was never intended to provide a decision-making process. The participants received a questionnaire answers to which were to be the basis of a synthesis of the state of mind of the Acadians present at the Convention. Given the political climate, this



Louis Robichaud, the first Acadian elected premier in N.B.

strategy was designed to avoid putting too much pressure on the SANB.

The result of the questionnaire showed 48.8% of the 1,500 participants opted for an Acadian province, while 7.1% favoured an Acadian country. On the other hand, 32.5% chose to preserve the existing province of New Brunswick while working for changes in the provincial structures.

There followed a genuine political crisis, with the Parti Acadien and the SANB becoming the targets of a number of attacks. The results of the convention posed a threat to the Liberal Party, which until then had carefully avoided

making any statement on the Acadian question, so as not to scare off voters in English-speaking ridings, while taking the Acadian ethnic vote for granted. The federal government appeared to be very concerned about the situation. In the months following the convention, the Secretary of State sent emissaries to convince the leaders of the SANB not to endorse the conclusions of the convention, and to withdraw their support for certain popular struggles such as that of the expropriated landowners of Kouchibouguac which became a symbol of the Acadian resistance against territorial and cultural disenfranchisement. Armed with the threat of cutting off grants, they insisted that the ranks of the Société be purged of the cumbersome members of the Parti Acadien and more effort made to involve the Acadian elites.¹

Forced to take a position, the SANB issued a statement on April 8, 1980. It explained that participants at the policy convention had not adopted any particular political option. That had not been the purpose of the convention and the participants did not have the necessary information to make an informed decision. In the opinion of the SANB, the questionnaire distributed at the convention was at most a thermometer. Acadians had simply indicated that they wanted a large measure of autonomy in their community affairs, but had not adopted the political position of demanding an Acadian province, nor had they given the SANB a mandate to work towards the goal of an Acadian province.²

In June 1980 the SANB succeeded in having its position ratified by the membership, which was already quite shaken by the threats. It encountered opposition on the regional restructuring of the organization, and had to agree to exclude Acadian institutions as honorary members of the organization. Following this, the Secretary of State Department, together with certain Acadian financial interests, founded the *Conférence permanente des institutions acadiennes* and cut the SANB's budget. The next year, the provincial government stopped financing regional development councils, which were considered nests of radicals stirring up grassroots struggles in the name of the Acadian cause.

The 1982 Election and After

For their part, the provincial Conservatives scurried to turn the situation to their advantage. Criticizing the attitude of the Liberals to the SANB and the Parti Acadien, they promised to enact a law setting out the conditions for equality between anglophones and francophones in the province. The *Linguistic Communities Equality Act* was enacted in 1981. It affirms the right of linguistic communities to their own distinct cultural, educational and social institutions. Criticism was fast to come. According to Léon Thériault "...We are ... faced with an Act of solely cultural effect, as were most earlier government Bills, a cultural Bill that is, in addition, very limited in scope. The

only innovation contained in Bill 88 is that it guarantees bilingualism in all the public institutions of the province, and that in the cultural, educational and social fields it guarantees that Acadians will have their own institutions, distinct from those of anglophones. There has been no mention of a division of powers between the two language communities in the province."³

During the 1982 election campaign, the Conservative Party took a position favouring in principle the report of the Official Languages Branch, recommending language reform in the province. On August 15, it proclaimed an Acadian national day, and organized a huge rally at Shippagan, where a meeting of 400 Acadian leaders was held. In concrete terms, the Conservative Party mounted a formidable offensive in Acadian ridings, although the campaign was systematically ignored by the English-language press.

The Conservatives were returned to power, effecting an unprecedented breakthrough in the French-speaking ridings. The Liberals lost five seats and the Parti Acadien has a miserable showing, dropping from 4% to 0.9% of the vote. The NDP vote rose substantially, from 6% to 10.2% of the ballots cast.

The Parti Acadien having been in disarray since the national policy convention the results were hardly surprising. In 1980, internal quarrels resulted in the resignation of the president, Donatien Gaudet. Louise Blanchard carried on in his place, and was elected president in 1981. Her reign was characterized by untimely strategic concerns which substantially altered the image of the party. By refusing comment on the Conservative government's budget, she was in effect stating that, for strategic reasons, the party would maintain a policy of silence about everything that directly affected the Acadian people.

In the 1982 election campaign the Parti Acadien was barely able to muster the ten candidates needed in order to be recognized as an official party. Moreover, the party adopted a strategy of concentrating its attacks on the Liberal Party, since it believed it to be of prime importance that that party's traditional hold on the Acadian community be broken. This strategy indisputably left the field free for the Conservatives. Some members of the Parti Acadien further accused it of playing second fiddle to the provincial

Conservative Party, and even of identifying too closely with the Conservatives. A breakdown of the results of the election confirms that the votes lost by the party went to the Conservatives.

Since 1982, so little has been heard about the Parti Acadien that, as many observers have said, it is a party in its death throes, with little hope of survival at this point. When the Parti Acadien retreated from the political scene the so-called moderate elements of the Acadian nationalist movement discussed the possibility of forming another political party with the goal of urging the reforms proposed by the present Conservative government.

From 1984 to 1986 there was a strong resurgence of ethnic polarization in New Brunswick including creation of an English-language group led by Len Poore, waging an all-out campaign against bilingualism under the slogan: More bilingualism, fewer jobs for anglophones. The racist tenor of this campaign against Acadians was unparalleled.

In the meantime, the SANB attempted to regain credibility by presenting itself as the conciliator in the conflict surrounding the death of *l'Évangéline*, and the defender of government reforms, by way of demands for corporatist reforms such as the establishment of French-language agricultural or municipal associations. The SANB has also worked to bring back into its fold those segments of the Acadian establishment that had not been seen for a decade. It must be noted that this fresh involvement was made possible by the departure of most of the progressive activists, so that the organization's image could be improved in the eyes of the elites. The *Conférence des Institutions Acadiennes* accordingly became useless and was dissolved. The SANB again became a respectable place to be seen.

Notes

1. We obtained this information from an animator who attended this meeting between the Secretary of State Department and the SANB. For obvious reasons he did not want to divulge his name.

2. See *Évangéline*, June 10, 1980.

3. See Léon Thériault, *La Question du pouvoir en Acadie*, Moncton, Éditions d'Acadie, 1982.