



EXTRAORDINARY  
CANADIANS

René Lévesque  
*by* DANIEL POLIQUIN



# Money Matters

When René Lévesque left politics in the fall of 1985, he handed his landlady the keys to the Quebec City flat he had rented during his nine years as premier. She asked him whether he had left anything behind. “No, no,” he said, “I’ve got everything right in here.” And he showed her the Provigo grocery bag he was holding on to.

Now, here was a man who had been in politics for twenty-five years; had founded a successful political party, the Parti Québécois (PQ); had been elected and re-elected premier of his province against formidable odds; had been instrumental in shaping his people’s destiny as well as Canada’s; and all he took back home could fit into a shopping bag.

René Lévesque’s proverbial disregard for money was one of the many reasons people liked him so much. As a politician, he managed the public purse as well as he could, even originating some astounding successes—Hydro-Québec, for instance. But his PQ government was also blamed for some equally spectacular failures: the provincial takeover of

Quebec's asbestos mines, to name but one. Still, people believed in their heart of hearts that he was a man of impeccable integrity.

True, his rapport with money may have been conditioned by his socio-cultural makeup. Jesuit-schooled as he was, he had surely been taught to be wary of soul-corrupting wealth. As well, he grew up speaking French, a language amazingly resourceful at camouflaging the vileness of money, especially if you have some.

However, Lévesque was too much of a rebel to let social determinants such as these instill in him indifference to money. His prodigal son behaviour actually stemmed more from a deeply entrenched adolescent psyche. He was forever the teenager who did not have two red cents to rub together, oblivious to what tomorrow would bring. Hence, his incorrigible chain-smoking, all-night poker-playing, hard-drinking, and skirt-chasing habits. And, like any life-loving teen, he did not mind hard work as long as it was rewarded with heavy partying and late-morning sleep.

He took the same devil-may-care attitude to his sovereignty-association project, whereby Quebec would become a separate state while maintaining economic ties with Canada and, notably, keeping our very reassuring Canadian dollar. When told by economists that he could

not have political independence without monetary self-sufficiency, he dismissed their objections as a mere matter of “plumbing.” “We’ll iron out the details later, things will take care of themselves ...” The adolescent in him would never let what many thought were incontestable facts interfere with his political and economic reverie.

His distrust of coin and paper had developed early in his life. Growing up in the Gaspé Peninsula in the dirt-poor 1920s and 1930s, he saw first-hand how cash-strapped fishermen became ensnared in a system of neo-feudal exploitation. Rich local merchants would pay for the fish half in cash and half in goods sold at the company stores, which held a monopoly on fishing gear and staples like flour and molasses, all sold of course to captive customers at outrageous prices. As a result, most fishermen ended up indebted to the company for life. Memories of men selling their lobster catches for pennies at the local wharf remained etched in young René’s mind. If money leads to economic serfdom, then money cannot be good, he reasoned. No wonder he found a feeling of emancipation in his disdain for wealth.

Sheer political will also contributed to shaping his outlook on money. Like all his contemporaries, Lévesque could see throughout his adulthood how slush funds greased

political wheels in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada, with anonymous bagmen bullying elected officials in cigar-smoke-filled rooms, immune to any sort of political accountability. He could see it in the Union Nationale (UN) of Premier Maurice Duplessis, the elected strongman who governed his native province without paying much heed to the social injustices of the times. He could also witness it in his first political family, the Quebec Liberal Party (QLP), always careful not to step on the delicate toes of moneymen. So something had to be done to free politics from dirty money—and that he managed to do just that is surely his greatest feat as a politician and his most enduring legacy.

Thus, when Lévesque founded the Parti Québécois after bolting from the QLP in 1967, he made sure that no donor, corporate or individual, would ever hamper political freedom again. His party would belong to its members only. And when he finally reached power in 1976, the first legislation he passed outlawed the pollution of politics by unaccounted-for money.

But he was no ascetic figure, far from it: he enjoyed his two packs of Belvederes a day, his marathon card games, and his extra-arid martinis too much for that. He was in fact very comfortable with the lifestyle of the ageless bohemian. That was who he was. In the 1970s, visitors to his apartment on

Pine Avenue in Montreal would notice the shabby, butt-stained furniture and the milk crate dressed up as a coffee table. According to biographer Pierre Godin, the author of four well-researched tomes on Lévesque, the PQ leader's passbook at the *caisse populaire* showed a balance of \$290.47 in December 1973, and the nest egg had melted to \$76.54 in February 1974, just enough to buy a couple cartons of cigarettes and a bottle or two of *château-dépanneur*, the kind of plonk available at the nearby corner store.

His sartorial tastes confirmed his vow of indifference to all things material. He was probably the first and only premier-elect in Canada to show up at his swearing-in ceremony dressed like a man who lives from one paycheque to the next: a brown leather coat whose better days were long forgotten, an off-the-rack rumpled suit with a crooked tie, Wallabees, whatever little hair left dishevelled, a face like an unmade bed, a lit cigarette hanging from his lips. He did not look the part of the powerful premier he had just become; he simply looked like who he was: the René Lévesque everybody knew, who was the same in real life as he was in the media.

He looked real, and Canadians seemed to enjoy authenticity. We still do.