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Vincent Geloso

# Rethinking Canadian Economic Growth and Development since 1900

The Quebec Case

Foreword by Conrad Black

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*To all those who actually cared and still care*

## Foreword

It is 40 years since I published my biography of Maurice Duplessis, which assaulted the fervently held conventional wisdom that he had been a retardant to the social and economic progress of Québec, and a despotic and almost medieval anachronism who riveted himself on the back of Québec by trickery, repression, corruption, and electoral fraud. In that book, I published a number of figures and tables that demonstrated that, contrary to that widely disseminated mythos, In Duplessis' last four terms as premier of Québec, from 1944 to 1959, Québec was steadily gaining, and this for the only time in its history, before or since, on Ontario, in terms of income per capita, levels of education, public health and life expectancy, and the indices of infrastructure, such as road mileage. I had already left the province when I published that book and in subsequent years, while I have often visited there, I have not focused on Québec with the same comprehensive attention that motivated me to study Duplessis' life and chronicle his career and its impact on Québec. Yet a gentle trend to reevaluate him has been discernible, symbolized by the decision of the incoming government of Rene Levesque to unveil the statue of Duplessis that had languished in the basement of the Provincial Police building in Montreal for 16 years as successive premiers of Québec appeared to be intimidated by the bronze effigy of Québec's longest-serving leader. On the 50 anniversary of his death in 1959, there was a partial reassessment of Duplessis' contribution to the province,

and the belated acknowledgement of some relatively learned dissent from the conventional wisdom that held to the fiction of the Grande Noirceur.

There had always been a substantial problem with that version of events in any circles more demanding than exchanges of partisan truisms. It was never easy for the propagators of the Great Darkness to explain how Duplessis won four consecutive elections in his second experience of government, and carried almost every working district in Québec, as well as most of the rural districts. When the non-French vote is deducted from the totals, Duplessis scored heavy popular vote majorities among French-speaking Quebecois, in his last three elections, 1956 surpassing 1952. The hackneyed fables about the malign magic performed by the so-called Union Nationale machine, in campaigns where the Elections Act was treated a bit casually by both sides but there were no significant problems of spoiled, lost, or stuffed ballots, never resonated very believably.

The key to Duplessis' success as head of the government was that he persuaded the conservatives and the nationalists to vote together, being neither too nationalistic for the conservatives, as he had been in 1939, when he disputed Liberal assurances to avoid war-time conscription (with some accuracy); nor too conservative for the nationalists, as his eventual successor, Jean-Jacques Bertrand, was in 1970. The administrative key to his success was that he retained clerical personnel in the schools and hospitals, whom he was able to pay modestly, compared to secular standards, and was thus able to devote an unusually high percentage of public spending to roads, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure, while reducing taxes, and balancing Québec's budget. In his last 15 years in office, the Duplessis government built 3,000 schools, all the universities in the province except McGill, astounding expansions of the road and hospital systems, and brought electricity up from 15% of rural households to 97%. Wages, and incomes generally rose sharply, and more quickly than Canada as a whole, and Ontario in particular, and he instituted Canada's most generous labour health systems and most comprehensive day care programs.

As access to teaching and nursing was largely through the clergy, it made Québec a somewhat priest-ridden society, but as this brilliant and

rigorous study by Vincent Geloso points out, births per thousand of population, compared to Ontario, a secular jurisdiction, yet declined between 1946 and 1960, from 148 per cent to 103 per cent. In that time, the percentage of people taking secondary education increased from 27.9 to 67.7, three times the rate of growth of Ontario. Cars and trucks per 100,000 people rose from 1,500 to 16,000, real manufacturing wages increased (in an era of minimal inflation), by 50 per cent, compared to 35 per cent in the United States, and workers and days lost in strikes per 100 people did not change in those 15 years, but rose nine-fold in the 15 years from 1960 to 1975. Duplessis disliked unions but took good care of the workers and was rewarded with their votes, despite the antagonism of both the Catholic and international labour leadership.

Public sector spending as a percentage of GDP rose from three to eight per cent between 1946 and 1960, but had tripled to 24 by 1982, and the provincial debt as a percentage of GDP declined from ten per cent in 1946 to one per cent when Duplessis died, and rose to 55% in 1982, (and is now just short of 100 per cent). Duplessis was able to attract vast foreign investment in natural resources and manufacturing and Québec's economy was quietly revolutionized to a more modern basis than it had ever known. But, as the statistics cited illustrate, though labour unions were discouraged, Québec ceased to be a pool of cheap or unskilled labour.

Duplessis had a formula for dealing with the nationalists, whom he described as "a ten-pound fish on a five-pound line, that have to be reeled in very carefully." But he never had recourse to discriminatory language legislation. Duplessis was successful because he delivered higher standards of living, better working conditions, improved social and public services, while reasserting Québec's rights in concurrent jurisdictions opposite Ottawa, specifically direct taxes, and making Québec stronger and more influential in Canada without frightening investors or driving out minorities. It was a delicate balancing act that he conducted with consummate skill for a whole generation, as he dominated the public life of Québec from 1931 when he became leader of the opposition, to his death, in office, in 1959.

As this absolutely disinterested and academically scholarly study that Vincent Geloso has carefully researched and very neutrally presents makes clear, the post-Duplessis era has been comparatively unsuccessful; and Québec and the quality of Québec life have suffered in many respects. It is time Québec realized that while secularization was broadly necessary, Québec has become a grotesquely inefficient, over-bureaucratized state dominated by its public sector, addicted to cultural discrimination and class warfare, and the fraud that darkness enshrouded the province before is a self-serving fable concocted by the political authors and fonctionnarist beneficiaries of this comparatively failed post-Duplessis regime. More broadly, it is time that Québec rediscovered the bravery of its past, of the long struggle against poverty, demography, and low capital formation, and the achievement of those, religious and secular, who preserved the French fact and the Québec jurisdiction, so the last two generations could experiment socially and politically as they have, albeit with very mixed results.

Vincent Geloso has provided an invaluable service that strenuously deserves to be read and sensibly evaluated, to reacquaint Québec with its noble past, and serve as a guide to greater and less troubled days ahead than those that Québec is enduring now.

Lord Conrad Black  
Author of *Duplessis*

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Any errors contained in this monograph are the sole responsibility of its author.

## About the Author

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