

ENTERTAINMENT

By Nelson Wyatt, THE CANADIAN PRESS, cp.org, Updated: September 2, 2009 7:14 PM

New film looks at Quebec's inability to achieve sovereignty

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A scene from the film "National Matters" is shown in an undated studio handout photo. THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO, Ixion Communications

MONTREAL - In the 40-plus years since Quebecers began proclaiming some desire to become sovereign, more than 100 countries have achieved independence.

But not Quebec. It has more political power, it has gone through two referendums - one in which sovereigntists came achingly close to winning - but it's still part of Canada. The fate of non-sovereign Quebec, Scotland and Catalonia are explored in "National Matters," a new documentary by filmmakers Roger Boire and Jean-Pierre Roy that is screening at Montreal's World Film Festival.

Economic security and concern about what an independent state might look like are cited as two of the reasons for Quebec's inability to break away. And then there's the explanation by Bernard Landry, the firebrand former premier and ex-leader of the Parti Quebecois.

"First, WE were Canada," he said in the documentary, pointing out his ancestors had referred to themselves as "Canayans" and everybody else was "the English." The anthem that became "O Canada" was first composed for the Société St-Jean Baptiste, he points out.

"Trying to explain to my grandfather why we had to separate from Canada, since Canada was part of his identity, was as if we were asking him to cut himself in half," Landry said.

It was a take that surprised the filmmakers, who didn't expect that to be Landry's first explanation for why his option has so far fallen short.

"That was very interesting for him to say that," said Boire, who says he personally has maintained a healthy skepticism of both the federalist and sovereigntist options.

"National Matters," which was shot in 2007 and 2008, takes an unusual approach to deciphering Quebec's sovereignty debate by contrasting it with similar drives for independence in Scotland and Catalonia.

"Scots and Quebecers have a lot in common in their nationalistic attitudes, in their relationships with their respective English - the English of Great Britain and the English of Canada," said Boire, who began considering the film project three decades ago.

Roy said Scots wrestle with identity and also the legal and economic effects of a transition to independence.

"We have the same kind of fear here in Quebec and Canada," said Roy, who voted Yes in the 1995 referendum and is now concerned about the survival of the French language and culture in Quebec.

Boire noted the Catalans share cultural and linguistic insecurity with Quebecers, something Roy notes is echoed by Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe in the movie when he talks about Quebecers' fear of assimilation.

"It's a big connection with Catalonia and it's very emotional."

The documentarians were careful to maintain a balance in their film. The point of view of non-sovereigntists - such as former Liberal leader Stephane Dion - is given equal weight to that of sovereigntists.

"Like Gilles Duceppe said, we're not living in a gulag," Roy said. "So it's a fact of life. The Quebecois have to decide about independence but there's no political pressure or economic pressure like in Eastern Europe or elsewhere in the world. It's a more civil way of doing independence."

Most polls have indicated that Quebecers are tired of the sovereignty issue and don't want another referendum. Roy and Boire acknowledged that a lot of people didn't want to hear about sovereignty or the PQ after the 2007 election.

But by skillfully weaving together historical and current events and stirring in the international angle, the two men have come up with a fresh and engaging look at the subject.

Boire points out that even though there isn't a lot of talk about sovereignty these days, the issue is still relevant. For instance, Quebec has never signed the Canadian Constitution and that's something that should concern everybody inside and outside the province, he says.

"The fact that it is not solved, it makes a problem for English Canada too," Boire said. "I'm not sure we would have the same government in Ottawa if the Bloc Quebecois had not had such success in Quebec."

Boire says he suspects most Quebecers are nationalist but they can't agree on what's best for the province - to go its own way or stay in Canada. It's a question academics could argue for "days, weeks, years and never give an answer that is objective," says Boire.

"I think that at the end, for most people, it's a matter of the heart. Is your heart in Quebec or is your heart in Ottawa? For many people it's in both places but for some people it's only in Quebec."

The filmmakers weren't sure which of the three countries they studied might become independent first but said many people suggest it could be Scotland.

And Quebec? They note former PQ leader Jacques Parizeau says all his option needs is another political crisis to stir things up. Parizeau has pointed to the famous scene of protesters in Brockville, Ont., stomping on the Quebec flag and said: Give me another Brockville, and we've got it.

The filmmakers agreed it's possible.

"It is the burning fire under the leaves," Boire said.

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