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Macpherson: Rewriting history in the classroom

By Don Macpherson, The Gazette March 10, 2013

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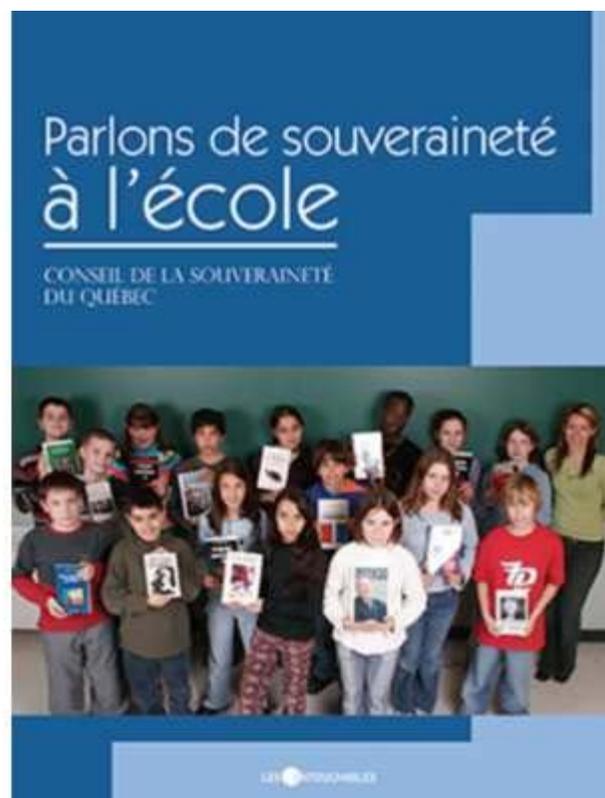
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"Parlons de la souveraineté à l'école", the text published for use in Quebec classrooms from preschool to university.

MONTREAL — “History is written by the winners,” Napoleon is supposed to have said.

But in Quebec, apparently it’s to be written by the losers.

The losers in the two referendums on sovereignty, that is.

And apparently they’re to rewrite the history taught in Quebec schools so that next time, they’ll come out the winners.

Sovereignists have long wanted to use the schools to promote their cause. Seven years ago, the [Conseil de la souveraineté](#) umbrella group published a textbook titled [Parlons de la souveraineté à l'école](#) — Let’s Talk About Sovereignty at School — for use in Quebec classrooms from preschool to university.

Nationalists have also been calling for “improved” teaching of Quebec history in the schools, scarcely bothering to conceal a connection with sovereignty.

The “issue” keeps coming up in meetings of sovereignist parties — and only sovereignist parties. It is another expression of their belief that Quebecers reject sovereignty out of ignorance.

The current [Parti Québécois policy program](#) proposes to change the teaching of Quebec’s “national history” in the schools to “favour knowledge of the political events of Quebec’s national history allowing an understanding of the evolution of Quebec society.”

The apparent hope is that schoolchildren will come to see sovereignty as the inevitable destination at the end of the long march of Quebec history from the British Conquest of New France.

In the [PQ platform for the election last Sept. 4](#), “the promotion of ... the teaching of our national history” was mentioned in the promise to promote sovereignty.

After the election of the PQ government, Education Minister Marie Malavoy made the government’s intentions more explicit.

She [told Quebec City’s Le Soleil](#) that the new government would place less emphasis on teaching English (which she called “a foreign language”) as a second language, and more on history — especially the sovereignty question.

“The issue of sovereignty has been avoided a bit,” the education minister said. “Heaven knows the national debate in Quebec has marked our recent history a lot, and it must be highlighted.” She hoped to begin teaching on sovereignty in high school as early as the 2013-14 school year.

Last month, PQ Premier Pauline Marois [promised her party’s national council](#) that Malavoy will soon present a new program for the teaching of history.

This was so that “Quebecers of all origins share a historical narrative that makes a connection between our past and our present, to project us into the future” — presumably in the direction of sovereignty.

And it appears that Malavoy is about to entrust the new history program to a small group of nationalist historians. They're members of an organization called the [Coalition pour l'histoire](#) that is close to the sovereignty movement. Several prominent sovereignist individuals and organizations are among the coalition's members. The formation of the coalition in 2009 was an initiative of [Mario Beaulieu](#), president of the old-line nationalist Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal.

Members of the coalition make up half of a task force created by Malavoy last month to advise her on the new program.

Now they're trying to take control of the task force by getting Malavoy to exclude historians from other schools of thought who hold, for example, that the Conquest had some positive effects on Quebec's development.

One of the leaders of the nationalist faction is popular historian [Éric Bédard](#). He's a co-founder of the Coalition pour l'histoire and, as Marois proudly noted in a speech to her party's youth commission last month, one of the commission's former chairs.

Apparently, Malavoy is going along with the nationalists' attempt to take over the task force; [Le Devoir reported](#) this week that she is to meet secretly next week with the coalition members.

This led an association of social-science teachers to publish [an open letter in Le Devoir](#) protesting against an apparent "manipulation of the teaching of history for purely political and partisan purposes."

Something else Napoleon is supposed to have said: "History is a lie agreed upon."

Agreement on the lie to be taught in Quebec schools will be easier if there's only one lie to consider.

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