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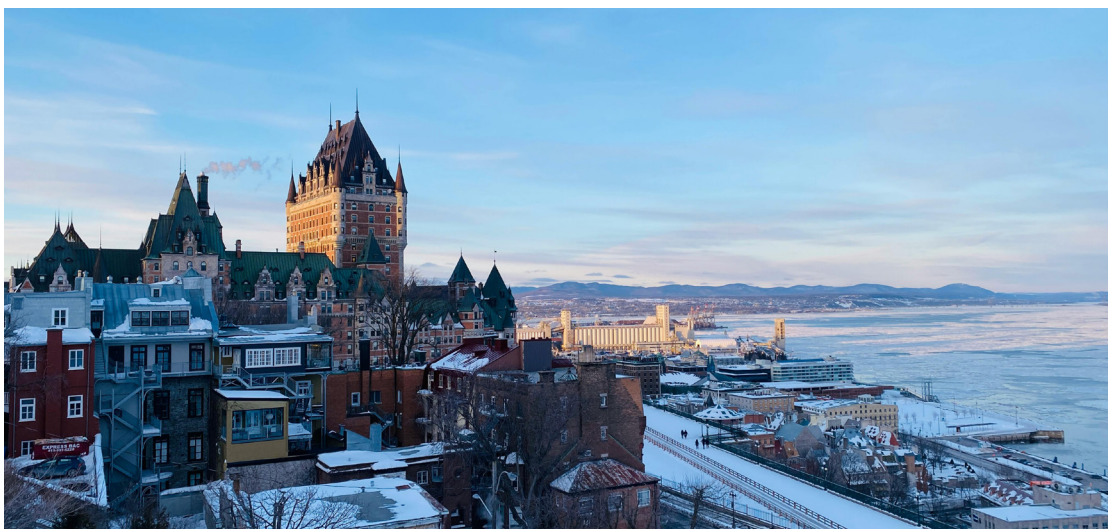
Imperial Compromise or Imperial Control? Rethinking the Quebec Act

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Jack Grosberg is an International Relations student at Boston University whose writing explores politics, identity, and governance. His work blends analytical curiosity with narrative voice. When not writing, he can be found photographing cities, working at the Massachusetts State Senate. He is always searching for the next little known story to uncover, preferably Canadian.

Most acts of governance are boring, however, some stand out. The Quebec Act is an radical idea, considering the time period in which it occurred. The British Empire was an oppressive force to the American people, as well as India and Africa. However, the time in which they made accommodations for the French-speaking people of Quebec was fascinating. Could it be that the British were fearful of another war with France or a civil uprising that would be costly to deal with after just finishing a costly war? This is a possibility, however, this article outlines the fact that there is a great extent to the limit of the Quebec Acts and the historic instability that led to the layout. The Quebec Act was a simple accommodation, revealing the paradox of an empire willing to oppress most of its subjects while selectively granting concessions to preserve stability. The Quebec Act represents a paradox of imperial control: selective tolerance as a means of domination.

The Quebec Act was significant because it legitimized the French colonists in Canada and established the Catholic faith as the official religion, allowing any acts related to religion to be determined solely by the king¹. The importance of this can be gleaned from studying how the British reinforced imperial control while simultaneously protecting religious frameworks in Quebec. Doing so caused a massive uproar. The Protestant majority colonies viewed this with such hostility, that they considered it one of the acts conducted by the British government as intolerable. Scholars have explored this paradoxical choice by the British government, stating that “the problem of settling a large Catholic territory obliged the British to reconsider the Hanoverian church–state relationship in an imperial context, undermining the



Quebec City Skyline.

1 Great Britain, An Act for Making More Effectual Provision for the Government of the Province of Quebec in North America (Quebec Act), October 7, 1774, Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed September 29, 2025, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/quebec_act_1774.asp

Reformation ideal of the sovereign Crown-in-Parliament as the secular guarantor of Protestant liberty².” Not only did the Crown’s action to preserve the Catholic creed in Quebec serve as an example that contradicted traditional British actions, but it also led to a theoretical reconsideration of the relationship with religion back home.

One of the groundbreaking ideas it brought about was the concept of Pluralism. The British government made compromises, instilling English criminal law. However, they retained French property laws and common law³. This is important as it would help create a distinct segment of society that would differ from the rest of Canada in the modern era. The Quebec Act introduced an early model of pluralism by deliberately blending British and French legal traditions, instead of suppressing the French traditional way of governance. While English criminal law was implemented to bring uniformity across the empire, the English preserved French civil and property law as an act of respect for local customs. The decision to retain some French laws was primarily aimed at accommodating the colony’s majority population. This legal setup would go on to set Quebec apart from the rest of the North American colonies, whether British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, or Dutch. By formally recognizing French legal traditions, the Crown not only reduced the risk of unrest but also legitimized cultural diversity among Quebec’s citizens. This decision helped lay the foundations for Quebec’s enduring distinctiveness, which did not come without its unrest and turmoil. This movement to retain the old French civil laws would serve as an offset to some rather undemocratic governance measures enacted under the Quebec Act.

An interesting aspect of the Quebec Act is its idea of democratic representation. Unlike the New World colonies, such as Virginia, which had a state assembly, the British government decided that Quebec would have no such assembly. The British Crown believed that electing an assembly every time an issue arose would consume too much time, so it should have a council of leaders appointed by the Crown to make decisions⁴. This is important because it eliminates any chance of establishing a democratic or assembly institution in Quebec and further solidifies non-democratic ideals in the province. Modern scholars agree with this, and analyses of the Quebec Political landscape in the early 1900s have stated that the French Canadians are a people with democratic institutions; however, they lack a strong set of democratic convictions⁵. This could be traced back to the Quebec Act. The Quebec Act of 1774 demonstrates how, in this case, the British Crown prioritized efficiency and control over representative governance. By arguing that electing an assembly for every issue would create delays and inconveniences, the Crown justified appointing a council of leaders under royal authority to govern the colony. This decision effectively eliminated any chance for the early establishment of democratic convictions among the people of Quebec, setting the province apart from the representative assemblies already developing in the Thirteen Colonies. All of this sets the framework for enforcing a top-down governance system with limited room for democratic experimentation. The Quebec Act thus represents not just a legal arrangement but a formative moment that shaped Quebec’s political development, one in which authority and governance were centralized rather than grounded in broad democratic participation.

Quebec is a remarkable province, from the historic Old City of Quebec to the waters of the Saint Lawrence, it has long been a land of significance. The Quebec Act is a testament to this, as it created a society that protected the religion of a people who had been conquered, thereby further respecting their

2 A. Walsh, “The Quebec Act (1774) and the Hanoverian Church–State Relationship,” *English Historical Review* 140, no. 602 (February 2025): 104.

3 “Quebec Act.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Accessed September 29, 2025. <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/quebec-act>

4 Great Britain, *An Act for Making More Effectual Provision for the Government of the Province of Quebec in North America (Quebec Act)*, October 7, 1774, Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed September 29, 2025, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/quebec_act_1774.asp

5 Quinn, H. F. *The Union Nationale: Quebec Nationalism from Duplessis to Lévesque*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.

laws and ways of life, which were revolutionary concepts for the time. All of this, however, was anchored firmly in reality by the lack of representation that prevented people from making their voices heard. All of this portrays the British as upholding an imperial autocratic system with selective tolerance, which importantly failed to dominate the Quebec brethren to the extent that would be outlined by the ideas of Antonio Francesco Gramsci. This may be related to English being a minority language in the province they ruled. The Quebec Act serves as a poignant example of a colonial paradox: an empire that oppressed millions yet carved out an island of cultural pluralism in Quebec, reminding citizens of today's modern world that the seeds of identity can still be sown in the shadows of authoritarian power.



Quebec Nouvelle France.

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