INTRODUCTION

Molly Pulver Ungar

During the 1960s, the intensity of nationalist feeling in Quebec increased, and along with it, the number of individuals and groups advocating independence. One of these groups was the Front de libération du Québec, (FLQ). (Quebec Liberation Front), which advocated violent separation from Canada.

Formed in 1963, the FLQ began a campaign of terror, carrying out hundreds of robberies and bombings in the Montreal area, and killing six people, including one FLQ member. Nevertheless, in the midst of the cultural excitement of the 1960s and the lead-up to Canada’s Centennial Year and Expo ’67, these terrorist acts failed to arouse the kind of public interest that might have been expected. However, the roar of approval from the crowd who heard France’s President Charles de Gaulle proclaim “Vive le Québec libre!”, and the violence that erupted during the June 1968 St. Jean Baptiste Day parade in Montreal, put events in Quebec on the front pages. That year, Pierre Trudeau became Prime Minister, partially because he was a strong voice against the nationalist movement in Quebec. Early in 1970 the FLQ changed its tactics, and organized three cells specializing in kidnappings. In May of that year, Robert Bourassa was elected Premier of Quebec, capitalizing to an extent on Quebecers’ anxiety about René Lévesque’s separatist Parti Québécois. Five months later, the October Crisis erupted, bringing Canadians face-to-face with homegrown insurrection, and presenting the country with the frightening possibility of civil unrest and revolutionary acts.

On the morning of October 5, 1970, armed members of the FLQ’s Liberation Cell kidnapped British trade commissioner James Cross from his home in Montreal, and issued a communiqué and a manifesto. In the communiqué the FLQ declared its solidarity with various international groups whom it viewed as struggling for liberation—Africans and African-Americans, Cubans, Algerians, and Palestinians. Moreover, they connected their actions to the historic Lower Canadian Rebellions of 1837–38 by copying onto their documents a 1904 illustration of a French-Canadian “Patriote”, demonstrating that they identified with Quebecers in the past who had rebelled violently against British rule. The kidnappers also demanded that the contents of their manifesto be broadcast, that some convicted felons be released from prison, that an airplane be provided to take the FLQ kidnappers to Cuba or to Algeria, and that a ransom of $500,000 in gold be paid.

For the next five days, while FLQ deadlines came and passed, federal and provincial government ministers tried to contain the situation by having the manifesto read only on French-language CBC, and agreed to let the kidnappers leave Canada. However, the authorities rejected any other demands. The Chenier cell of the FLQ then kidnapped Labour Minister and Quebec Deputy Premier Pierre Laporte from his home on October 10, causing widespread fear that the authorities were powerless and that further abductions would follow. Newspapers speculated wildly on possible actions that might be taken, ranging from giving the FLQ whatever it wanted to save the lives of Cross and Laporte, to not giving in on any terms. The FLQ was alleged to have hundreds of highly organized adherents, or just a handful of fanatical amateurs. Police continued their investigations amid a growing perception that they were stretched very thin, and needed reinforcements in order to be able to carry out as many raids as were necessary, and still keep public order.

By October 13, Canadian soldiers were stationed outside public buildings in Ottawa, and rumours circulated that radical action would soon be taken by the federal government. Approachen on the steps of Parliament by TV reporters Tim Ralfe of the CBC and
Peter Reilly of CJOH, Prime Minister Trudeau gave an off-the-cuff interview while using his formidable debating skills to point out that the government had no intention of bargaining with criminals and that public order needed to be restored. When asked how far he would go to resolve the crisis, Trudeau uttered one of his most famous and enigmatic statements when he responded “Well, just watch me.”

From this point events developed quickly after Robert Bourassa requested that Canadian soldiers be sent to Quebec for protection as well as to support the provincial police force. When participants at a large student rally in Montreal expressed their enthusiastic support for the FLQ, government representatives began to fear that they were no longer in control. On October 16, after securing letters from Premier Bourassa and Montreal Mayor Jean Drapeau that emergency federal powers were necessary to deal with the civil disorder in Quebec, Prime Minister Trudeau proclaimed the War Measures Act. The War Measures Act had been invoked only twice before, in the Great War and in World War II, and this was the first time it was being used in peacetime. Under the War Measures Act, the FLQ was declared an illegal organization, the civil liberties of all Canadians were suspended, and the Quebec police carried out hundreds of raids, eventually arresting and jailing without warrant, over 450 people.

The next day, the body of Pierre Laporte was discovered in the trunk of a car that had been parked at an airport outside Montreal. The shock and trauma of the murder further complicated the heated national debate among politicians, the media, and the public about the wisdom and necessity of using such draconian legislation under the circumstances. In general, however, the prime minister’s action received widespread approval. After October 17, all popular sympathy for the FLQ faded, and a sense of order began to return with the state funeral for Pierre Laporte, followed by municipal elections in Montreal. On November 2, the War Measures Act was downgraded to the Public Order Temporary Measures Act, which expired on April 20, 1971.

Meanwhile, the police continued to look for James Cross and his kidnappers, as well as Laporte’s kidnappers. On December 3, after arresting one member of the Chenier cell and two members of the Liberation cell, police negotiated James Cross’s release in return for safe passage to Cuba for seven members of the Liberation cell. It seemed that the October Crisis had finally ended. At the end of December, Prime Minister Trudeau said that troops, whose numbers had reached over 7,000 at the height of the crisis, would be withdrawn by January 4, 1971. On December 28, police arrested three members of the Chenier cell.

From 1971 to 1973, the trials, convictions, and sentencing of the FLQ kidnappers took place. For the murder of Pierre Laporte, Chenier cell members Paul Rose and Francis Simard were sentenced to life in prison; for Pierre Laporte’s kidnapping, Bernard Lortie was sentenced to 20 years in prison, and Jacques Rose to eight years in prison. By 1983 all the members of the Chenier cell had been paroled, and the Liberation cell members had returned from Cuba. They served light sentences for their part in the abduction of James Cross, and reintegrated themselves into Quebec society. The cause of independence did not suffer, because six years after the October Crisis, the Parti Québécois won the provincial election, and René Lévesque became Premier of Quebec. In Québeckers’ collective memory, the October Crisis was reimagined as an event of misguided but understandable defiance of the authorities, and the imposition of the War Measures Act acquired the image of yet another example of how the federal government would use any excuse to deal harshly with Quebec.

The outburst of public violence that manifested itself in kidnappings and murder left an ambiguous legacy. For Quebec nationalists such as Felix Leclerc, the events of October 1970 brought anger and despair. In the words of his song “L’Alouette en colère” (The Lark in Anger) Leclerc expressed his anxiety that young French-Canadians who were made to
feel like strangers in their own country would again turn to violence in the future. Others, like Jack Saywell in his book *Quebec 70*, tried to document the events as precisely as possible, in order to understand how the situation could have unfolded in such disorder and with such disastrous outcomes. Saywell concluded that the October Crisis had revealed how easily Canadians were willing to give up their civil rights for the sake of what they were told was a national emergency.

The October Crisis also gave rise to questions that become more complex with the passage of time. Whether the federal government’s use of the *War Measures Act* was justified under the circumstances needs to be considered in light of the fact that accurate information about the exact number of the FLQ kidnappers was not known at the time. As well, whether the imposition of the *War Measures Act* precipitated the murder of Pierre Laporte, and whether Trudeau’s unbending attitude caused the crisis to escalate, are some of the questions that the October Crisis continues to present to historians and researchers.

More recently, historians such as Éric Bédard have looked for the ideological roots of the October Crisis against the background of the international social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Bédard suggests that the FLQ was devoted to the spontaneity and radicalism of the counterculture, and transformed their rejection of organized religion into an adherence to the ideology of independence. For Raphael Cohen-Almagor, the October Crisis illuminated important issues of ethics and media bias. Highlighting the opportunism and pro-FLQ position of the French-language press in Quebec, he notes the media’s use of the traumatic public events as a stage for progressively more exaggerated, unsubstantiated claims. He maintains that irresponsible and destructive reporting in 1970 set dangerous precedents for the future.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What was the FLQ, and what were some of its early activities?
2. What were some of the events leading up to the October Crisis?
3. After kidnapping Cross, what were the FLQ’s demands and what was the response of the federal government?
4. What were some of the outcomes of the October Crisis?
5. Was Prime Minister Trudeau justified in invoking the *War Measures Act*?
6. How did the October Crisis affect the future of the separatist movement in Quebec?
7. Was the October Crisis really a case of home-grown terrorism?

**FURTHER READINGS**


