

Flag Display and Precedence in Québec

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Québec is the largest Canadian province and the only one with French as the sole official language. Originally part of the French colony of “New France”, after the defeat of French troops on the Plains of Abraham it was ceded to the British Crown under the Treaty of Paris in 1763, eventually becoming part of Canada. Its size (24% of the country’s population) and unique historical origins have led many to consider the province a “nation within a nation” and some to propose complete separation from Canada. In fact, Québec’s import-export performance would place it among the world’s top 20 economies if it were a separate country, and it often seeks bilateral relations with other countries or sub-national entities. As the largest French-speaking society in North America, Québec is deeply attached to its culture, and often uses its cultural symbols and practices to distinguish its relationship to and status within the country of Canada.

The Québec flag (Figure 1), sometimes called the *fleurdelisé* (referring to the four white *fleurs-de-lis*), is the national emblem of Québec and was adopted in 1948. While the flag is fairly recent, it has a lengthy lineage. Designed in 1902, based on a banner discovered in 1848, which in turn commemorated a battle in 1758, it evokes the lilies of the kings of France, which first appeared around the year 1000. The Government of Québec uses the *fleurdelisé* to help Québécois recognize the authority responsible for services provided to them, and to demonstrate and emphasize Québec’s “nationality”, in ways that differ from usage in most other Canadian provinces.

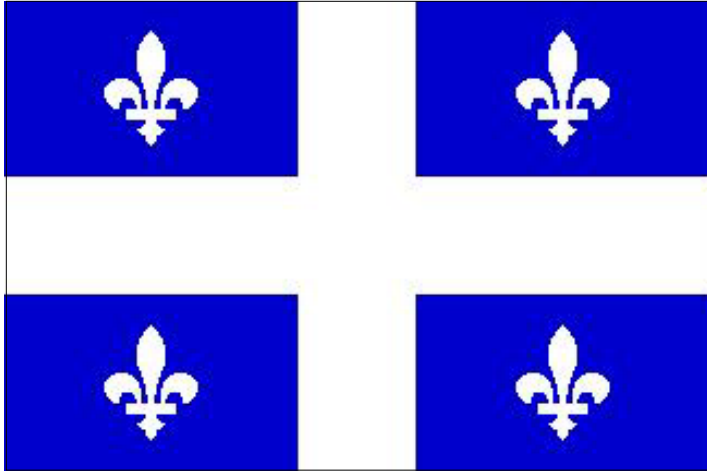


Figure 1. The flag of Québec.

This article describes some of the issues I deal with in carrying out my duties as the officer responsible for flag display in the Government of Québec, issues that take up about a third of my time. I will start by describing the role of the Government of Québec's protocol branch, known as "Le Protocole", with respect to flag display. I will then outline the main parameters that guide Le Protocole in the area of international flag display. Following this, I will describe some problem cases that I have dealt with over the past several years.

MANDATE OF LE PROTOCOLE

The mandate of Le Protocole is:

1. to fulfill Canada's obligations with respect to foreign representatives and diplomats with jurisdiction in Québec. Essentially, this involves the privileges and immunities set forth in the Vienna Conventions with respect to diplomatic and consular relations;
2. to organize official visits requested by diplomats with jurisdiction in Québec (ambassadors, consuls general, and equivalents);

3. to organize official visits by heads of state and government, leaders of major international organizations and foreign government departments, and other high-ranking officials);
4. to organize programs and accompany the Premier of Québec on foreign missions;
5. to organize government ceremonies and receptions assigned to Le Protocole;
6. to contribute, as required, to all or part of major events involving the participation of the Government of Québec, both at home and abroad (Figures 2–4).

Le Protocole generally uses flags in fulfilling all but the first aspect of its mandate.



Figure 2. Florida's governor Jeb Bush meets with Québec's premier Jean Charest before the flags of Quèbec and Florida.



Figure 3. Alternating flags of Québec and Bavaria at Jean-Lesage International Airport in Québec.



Figure 4. The flags of France and Québec displayed from the cockpit windows of a visiting jet.

However, despite decades of tradition, Le Protocole is no longer responsible for the flag of Québec itself. Since 1999, the *Act Respecting the Flag and Emblems of Québec* has governed the official use of the Québec flag. The Ministère de la Justice (Department of Justice) is responsible for administering this Act, as well as the *Regulation Respecting the Flag of Québec*. The Ministère du Conseil exécutif (the Premier's

department) nevertheless consults Le Protocole in circumstances that could require the flag of Québec to be flown at half staff. The Government of Québec has no jurisdiction over the Canadian flag flown at buildings that house federal government offices, just as the federal government has no say when it comes to flying the Québec flag in keeping with the *Regulation Respecting the Flag of Québec*.

The *Act Respecting the flag and emblems of Québec* defines Québec's official symbols, namely the flag, coat of arms, seal, and emblematic tree, flower, and bird—the yellow birch, *iris versicolor*, and snowy owl (Figures 5–7). (The lieutenant governor's personal flag is not one of our official emblems.)



Figure 5. The arms of Québec.



Figure 6. The seal of Québec.

In essence, the role of Le Protocole is to advise the Government of Québec and its institutions (departments, public agencies, educational institutions, health institutions, municipalities, etc.) about how to fly other flags alongside the flag of Québec. I will call this “international flag display”. In most cases, these international flags are the flags of sovereign states. Occasionally, they can be:

- flags of groups of federated states such as the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, the European Union, and the Organization of American States;
- flags of federated states with which Québec maintains bilateral relations (Bavaria, Catalonia, Vermont, Ontario, etc.);
- flags of international governmental organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization;
- banners of cities and regions (France’s Rhone-Alpes region, for example);
- flags and banners of international non-governmental organizations such as the Organization of World Heritage Cities;
- banners of various organizations, including Québec government corporations;
- banners for international events such as the World Police and Fire Games;
- personal flags of dignitaries such as the queen, the lieutenant governor of Québec, or other high-ranking officials.



*Figure 7.
Québec’s tree,
flower, and bird:
the yellow birch,
iris versicolor, and
snowy owl.*

FLAG LOANS

For international activities that involve Québec government departments and agencies, Le Protocole evaluates the advisability of displaying flags, proposes a flag-display plan (if applicable), and loans the necessary

flags and staffs. Flags are also loaned for major international events involving the Government of Québec (in many cases this involvement is financial) and, occasionally, non-governmental organizations. For pedagogical purposes—and to avoid unnecessary shifting and handling of flags—we provide a flag plan in the form of a laminated table.

Le Protocol has about 3,000 flags (including about 100 in Montréal) to meet its needs for its own displays and for loans. Most are indoor flags measuring 3 x 6 feet or 4 x 6 feet. We also have an outdoor flag for each country (4 1/2 x 9 feet or 6 x 9 feet), to be raised over the Québec Parliament Building, seat of our national assembly (Figure 8). An 8 x 12-foot flag of Québec has been flown atop the central tower of the building since 1948.



Figure 8. Québec's Parliament Building displaying the flags of France and Québec (during a visit by French Prime Minister Raffarin).



Figure 9. The flag of Slovakia on a limousine, flanked by the flags of Slovakia, Québec, and Canada.

The rest of our inventory consists of 8 x 12-inch pennants flown on limousines (Figure 9) used during official visits by heads of state, heads of government, and representatives of heads of state (ambassadors and high commissioners).



Figure 10. The 16' x 24' flag of Québec atop the Montréal headquarters of Hydro-Québec.

The largest flag of Québec flies atop Hydro-Québec's 20-story headquarters in Montréal (Figure 10): it measures 16 x 24 feet and, because of the wind, we have to replace it every two months!

FLAG PROPORTIONS

Le Protocol places appropriate importance on the official proportions of flags, including those of the Québec flag (2:3), the Canadian flag (1:2), and the flags of other states. Around the world, flags come in over 30 different proportions, ranging from 11:28 for Qatar to 3:2 for Nepal. Belgium and Rwanda offer examples of unusual proportions. The official proportions of the U.S. flag are 10:19 (Figures 11–15).

However, manufacturers usually only sell flags with 1:2 or 2:3 proportions. Le Protocol buys flags with dimensions as close as possible to the official proportions. Budget permitting, we are perfectionists in this area. For a meeting of heads of protocol from across Canada in Québec City in 2001, for instance, we ordered two specially-made flags for each province and territory in the correct proportions (3:5, 5:8, 9:16, 1:2, and 2:3)!

WHY DISPLAY FLAGS?

The Government of Québec has established specific rules for using the flag of Québec. It is reasonable to assume that these rules are comparable to those in other countries and societies.



Figure 11. Québec 2:3.



Figure 12. Canada 1:2.



Figure 13. Belgium 13:15.



Figure 14. Rwanda 6:13.



Figure 15. United States of America 10:19.

Without discussing the emblematic value of flags or the symbolic impact of flag-flying by citizens, I would like to point out that the institutions specified in the *Regulation Respecting the Flag of Québec* are required to display a Québec flag in order to identify the source of the services that they provide: “As the national emblem, the flag of Québec must be officially displayed by a public institution or an establishment under the authority of the Administration in order to identify the former as belonging to the latter.” This obligation refers to the areas of jurisdiction granted under the Constitution of Canada to either the provinces or the central government. Within the territory of Québec, federal court buildings, post offices, and armed forces offices fly the Canadian flag, while health institutions, schools, and tribunals under provincial jurisdiction are identified by the flag of Québec. This means that for us, the presence of a flag should not be interpreted as a sign of belonging to or identification with a sovereign country.

The use by the Government of Québec of a foreign national emblem is a courtesy extended to foreign dignitaries on official visits to Québec. This means that we decide how to use and position the flag of Québec and



Figure 16. Québec / France / Canada / EU.

the foreign flag. As set forth in the *Act Respecting the flag and emblems of Québec*, the Québec flag has precedence in all cases, including alignments of flags and official ceremonies. This applies to displays including the flag of Canada and foreign flags, and we are aware that our usage is a departure from international rules. I will come back to this problem.



Figure 17. Québec / EU / France.

We decide how to display flags ourselves, according to our traditions, rather than copying or imitating the way they are displayed in our visitors' home countries. For example, even though the French now systematically display the flag of the European Union alongside that of France, we are not obliged to indicate France's membership in the EU in our courtesy flag displays. However, this guideline is not always applied.

This is a good time to highlight the extent to which flag display guidelines differ from one country to another, as shown in the following pair of photos taken during a visit by French Prime Minister Raffarin (Figures 16-17). Neither of these events was held in the "Salon Rouge" (the Parliament Building's legislative council chamber).

DISPLAYING THE FLAG OF CANADA

Le Protocole advises the institutions subject to the *Regulation Respecting the Flag of Québec* to avoid juxtaposing the Québec and Canadian flags, for the reasons just mentioned. This doesn't always mean that they follow our advice. The flag is a means of communication, and we do not see any reason for Québec cabinet ministers to display a flag of Canada in their office, as they do not exercise any federal authority. In our opinion the same logic applies to federal ministers: the Canadian flag in their office shows that they represent the federal government—a provincial flag would be out of place (and in any case, which provincial flag would be appropriate?).



Figure 18. Displaying the flags of Québec and Canada in the National Assembly's Salon Rouge.



Figure 19. The Governor of Vermont and the Premier of Québec with only the flags of Vermont and Canada visible behind them.

A problem arises in flag display in the Parliament Building's Salon Rouge, which is used for a variety of Québec government ceremonies. Immediately after the current government was elected in April 2003, it decided that the flag of Canada must be displayed at all times in the Salon Rouge. Both Le Protocole and the protocol branch at the National Assembly branch have therefore had to incorporate the flag of

Canada into all flag alignments (Figure 18). Combined with the obligation to give precedence to the flag of Québec, this has led to a certain incoherence.

Following the signing of an intergovernmental agreement by the governor of Vermont and the premier of Québec, for instance, the Ministère des Relations Internationales (Ministry of International Relations) posted a photo of the event on its web site (Figure 19). Given the angle from

which the picture was taken, only the flags of Vermont and Canada were visible—leaving web visitors with a clearly erroneous impression.

Québec awards the “Ordre national du Québec” to worthy citizens and, on exceptional occasions, foreign officials. The ceremony is usually held in the Salon Rouge. How can we explain the fact that this essentially Québec event (there is also an Order of Canada) is held in the presence of the national emblem of Canada?

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF STATES

Certain states do not enjoy universal recognition. Palestine, for instance, has only observer status at the United Nations, and Taiwan is not a member of the UN and is not officially recognized by Canada. While Québec supports this non-recognition, this does not prevent us from showing our traditional courtesy during visits by high-ranking dignitaries: we fly the visitor’s flag on the Parliament Building tower and display it during official activities.

On the other hand, if a dignitary from the People’s Republic of China and a Taiwanese official attend the same event, we avoid displaying the flag of Taiwan, as such display would imperil the participation of the Chinese dignitary. Indeed, Chinese governments (both central and regional, the latter do not have their own flag) are opposed to the presence of the flag of Québec—a non-sovereign nation—next to the Chinese flag. They tolerate this display only if the Canadian flag is included in the alignment, even in the context of direct bilateral relations between Québec and China.

HALF STAFF DISPLAY

On the day of the funeral of a current head of state, we usually (but unfortunately not always) fly our most emblematic flag—the Québec flag atop the central tower of the Parliament Building—at half staff. There is

no justification for flying the flag of the state in question at half staff, unless this flag is already displayed for another reason at the time of the funeral (as in the case of Hafez al-Assad).

Following the death of the president of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, we did not lower the Québec flag on the central tower of the Parliament Building to half staff, as we do on the day of the funeral of a current head of state. The Government of Québec decided to align itself with the federal position, as it does increasingly for half-staff displays. On the other hand, soon before a visit to Québec by Leila Shahid, the Palestinian Delegate General in France, whom I had the pleasure of accompanying, we raised the flag of Palestine above the Parliament Building. Ms. Shahid was deeply moved—particularly given that the very same day, in Québec City, she organized the transfer from Ramallah to Paris of her great friend Yasser Arafat, who was close to death.



Figure 20. The flags of Vatican City and Québec at half-staff over the Parliament Building after the death of Pope John Paul II.

In the case of Pope John Paul II, the Government of Québec decided to fly all official flags at half staff from the announcement of his death until sunset on the day of his funeral (Figure 20). This decision was in keeping with our Catholic history. The Government of Canada made the same decision (or perhaps I should say that Québec made the same decision as Ottawa!). I dared to innovate by suggesting that the Government clarify the reason for this period of mourning by flying a Vatican flag at half staff above a Parliament Building tower. My proposal was accepted.

PERSONAL FLAG OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF QUÉBEC

The Act Respecting the Flag and Emblems of Québec (assented to by the lieutenant governor, as are all other Québec laws in force) specifies that the flag of Québec has precedence over any other flag in all ceremonies. On the other hand, according to the Government of Québec's guidelines for official precedence (as displayed on the Internet) the lieutenant governor is given precedence over the premier (Figure 21). What happens when both of these officials attend a government ceremony?

As the representative of the head of the Canadian state, the lieutenant governor flies her personal flag for all official activities, giving it precedence over the flag of Québec. Even though she is Québec's highest-ranking official, she sometimes performs her duties in the absence of the flag of Québec—a usage not authorized by the *Act Respecting the Flag and Em-*



Figure 21. The personal flag of the lieutenant governor of Québec.

blems of Québec (despite the fact that, technically speaking, the lieutenant Governor's personal flag is not considered on the same footing as other flags). I should point out that this practice is in compliance with federal etiquette, according to which the flag of Canada has precedence over all other flags other than the personal flags of the queen, the governor general, and the ten lieutenant governors.

We are currently grappling with another contradiction. The offices of the lieutenant governor in Québec City recently moved to a new location, to a building that also houses Québec government offices. This means that the flag of Québec should be given precedence in front of the building. Following the installation of a second flag pole, which flag should be given precedence? Fortunately, before the Government of Québec had to take action to settle the issue, the lieutenant governor herself raised her flag, giving precedence to the flag of Québec despite the federal etiquette detailed above.

CITY OF QUÉBEC

The federal government recently asked the City of Québec (a municipal institution that reports to the provincial government) to allow it to use its council chamber to hold a citizenship ceremony presided over by a federal judge, in the presence of a federal minister. The permanent flag display (layout #1) is: Québec, Canada, City (Ville) of Québec (Le Protocole disagrees with the presence of the flag of Canada—but I didn't want to raise the issue, which is a hot local topic!). The flag display requested by the federal government is shown in layout #2, with the flags of Canada, provinces, and territories in sequence. However, Le Protocol advised the municipal protocol branch to opt for proposed combined layout #3, and the federal officials followed our suggestion, an honorable solution to the contradictory precedence rules (Figure 22).

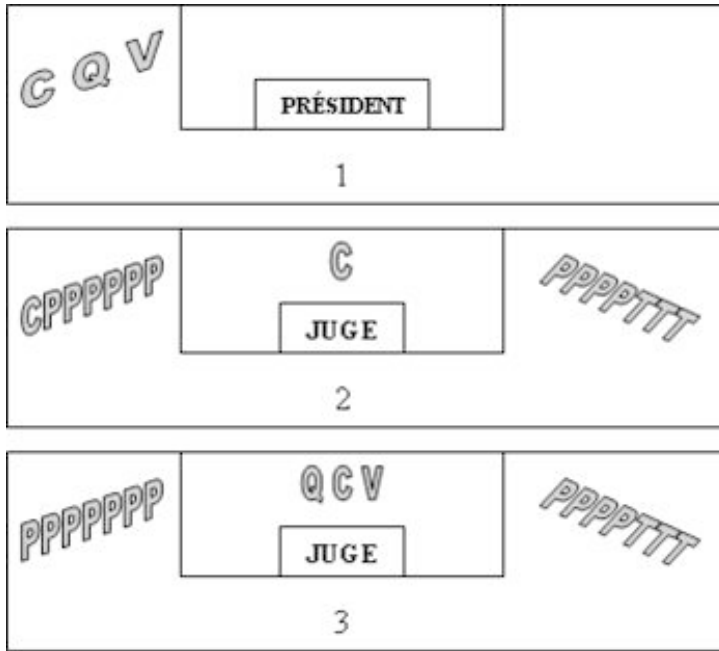


Figure 22. Alternative flag-display layouts for federal citizenship ceremonies in Québec.

CONCLUSION

Now that I have described a certain number of problems encountered in recent years, I have to add that flag displays during the past two years have been influenced by political agendas, to the detriment of the displays recommended by the flag display adviser and even the Government of Québec's head of protocol, who is also a civil servant. Among other issues, I have noted the inadequate display of the flags of Canada and the European Union.

In my mind, the rules for flag display stipulate that a *single* flag, displayed in the *place of honor*, is perfectly adequate to fulfill the national emblem's prime communication role. However, we often see three, four, or even five Québec flags at a time. This type of display resembles the federal government's practice of aligning 10 or even 15 maple leaf flags during press conferences—real backdrops! In my opinion, this is decoration, not display.

Some people say that Québec's current federalist government, led by a political party identified with the color red (which is also the color of the Canadian flag) is trying to "reappropriate" the flag of Québec following several years of government by a sovereignist party, identified with the color blue (the color of Québec flag).

However the trends of flag display may vary with time and political developments, they remain a potent measure of Québec's sense of itself as a province, government, and culture within the Canadian federation.



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