The verdict of most political commentators is that the 2021 federal election was a rather pointless affair. The results were very similar to those of the previous 2019 election, both in terms of the parties’ standings in the House of Commons and their respective shares of the popular vote. From the outset, the campaign appeared to lack a clear, defining issue, although there certainly were many points of disagreement between the parties and their leaders. Nevertheless, it seems likely that history will soon forget an election that saw one of the lowest rates of voter turnout in Canadian history, about five percentage points below voter turnout in the previous two elections.

In fact, however, history has a way of forgetting about most Canadian elections. Relatively few of them have been hugely divisive affairs, characterized by spikes in popular passions, an overriding and momentous issue, or a major and enduring shift in voter preferences. Indeed, since the 1988 election, when the issue was free trade with the United States, in 1993, an election that produced startling changes in the party composition of the House of Commons, one would be hard-pressed to point to a more recent federal election that can be judged to have been a watershed moment in Canadian politics.

But, perhaps we shouldn’t be too quick to write off the 2021 election as yet another one that history will forget. Looking back on it twenty years from now, it may be that at least one moment during the election will be remembered for what it told us about the deeper and enduring currents of Canadian political life. That moment involved the clash between what have long been called the Two Solitudes, one French-speaking and located predominantly in Quebec, and the other English-speaking and constituting the vast majority of the population in the rest of Canada.

The circumstances of this moment in the 2021 election campaign were widely reported and are pretty well known. During the English-language leaders’ debate the moderator asked Yves-François Blanchet, leader of the Bloc Québécois, a question whose clear premise was that Quebec’s Bill 21, dealing with laicity (or laïcité in French), and that prohibit most of the province’s public employees from wearing religious symbols when at work, and Bill 96, which aims to strengthen protections for the French language in Quebec, are discriminatory. This belief is shared by the majority of English-speaking Canadians, but not by most French-speaking Quebecers. Monsieur Blanchet very firmly rejected what he said was the incorrect and misinformed premise of the question, emphasizing that these laws are supported by a majority of Quebec citizens.

Quebec’s premier, François Legault, echoed the Bloc Québécois leader’s rejection of the debate moderator’s charge that Bills 21 and 96 are discriminatory. Legault said, and I quote, “It is my duty to protect the French language, to defend our values,” adding that the claim that the impugned laws are discriminatory and even racist is, his words, “ridiculous”. Legault went on to say, with great emphasis, and I quote, “Bill 21 doesn't apply in the rest of Canada. So please, please, it's none of your business.”

The Two Solitudes have very different ideas about what is at stake here. English Canada and its opinion leaders view Quebec’s laicity laws, in particular, but also some of the measures in Bill 96, as full frontal challenges to Canadian multiculturalism and the primacy of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Charter, including religious freedom. French-speaking Quebec is more likely to see these laws as necessary for the preservation of the French language and the distinctive culture of Quebec.

Media coverage of the debate exchange on Quebec’s laws reflected this gap between the Two Solitudes. In the English language media, coverage was chiefly about whether the moderator had made herself the story, by asking the question in such a confrontational and even accusatory manner, and secondly, what impact the exchange might have on voting in Quebec. Almost no one took issue with the charge that Quebec’s Bills 21 and 96 are discriminatory.

In the French-speaking media of Quebec, there certainly was discussion of whether the question was inappropriately confrontational and also what impact Bloc Québécois leader Blanchet’s answer and the subsequent intervention by Quebec premier Legault might have on how Quebecers would vote in the 2021 federal election. But there was also a tsunami of commentary on English Canada’s obvious lack of sympathy for laws that most Quebecers support, but that most English Canadians find to be un-Canadian and undemocratic.

Days after the leaders’ debate, Quebec’s provincial legislature approved, unanimously, a motion condemning what it called “Quebec bashing.” Here is my translation of that motion, a motion that was supported by all four parties, as well as the six independent members of Quebec’s assemblée nationale, quote, “The Québécois constitute a nation that is open, strong and proud, and that has the full ability to have frank discussion on subjects that are often delicate, and to legislate on matters that fall under the authority of the Quebec legislature. We call for an end to “Quebec bashing,” a phenomenon that damages the proper functioning of the Canadian federation, and that seeks to portray sensitive and complex issues in a negative and exaggerated manner in order to depict Quebec in a way that is unjustly negative. Finally, the Québécois are free to make their own decisions and to exercise their right to vote, as concerns their institutions, without undue influence from anyone.” End of quote.

You may be wondering about the reference in the motion to the phenomenon of “Quebec bashing.” In fact, the French-language media have been full of such charges for months, and even years, before the 2021 election leaders’ debate brought this to the attention of English Canadians. In 2017, Professor Maryse Potvin of the University of Montreal published an article whose English translation would be, “Racist slurs regarding Quebec in English Canada since 1995.” Potvin speaks of what she calls verbal violence toward Quebec and the banality and legitimation in English-speaking Canada of what she calls a racist discourse in regard to the province. Well, rightly or wrongly, many if not most of Quebec’s French-language opinion leaders agree. A few months before the 2021 election, Mario Dumont, a journalist and former leader of the now defunct Action Démocratique du Québec, referred to what he called the enjoyment by some English Canadians—and here he was referring not just to average citizens, but to their politicians and other opinion leaders—enjoyment in the fact of having said “no” in 1989 to Quebec’s demand that it be recognized in the Constitution as a distinct society. Dumont goes on to say, “It is as if one finds satisfaction in the power of the majority to refuse its consent, even if it means betraying the fundamental principles of this country, which involved a compromise between two nations.” Separatist journalist Mathieu Bock-Côté goes as far as to accuse many English-language opinion leaders of engaging in the “Nazi-fication” of Quebec, comparing the province’s Bills 21 and 96 and similar legislation proposed by previous Parti Québécois and Liberal governments in Quebec, to the discrimination that existed under Hitler. Bock-Côté adds that, in the eyes of English Canada, quote “When the Québécois do not see themselves as a francophone Canadian minority in a province where they are only one ethnic group among others, they pose a problem.” End quote.

Well, you may or may not agree with Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet and Quebec premier François Legault, or with the Quebec legislature’s unanimous motion criticizing what it called “Quebec bashing,” or with the analyses of such French-language Quebec opinion leaders, as Mario Dumont and Mathieu Bock-Côté. There is no doubt, however, that the tempest triggered by an election debate question, wrapped in an accusation, has shown that the Two Solitudes and their rather different visions of Canada remain very much alive and capable of roiling the waters of this country’s politics. We will have more to say about this in a subsequent podcast. Stay tuned.