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#### **AUTHOR BIO**

R. Georges Gardinetti is a graduate student at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada and studies public policy.

Dr. Valérie Vézina is a professor of political science at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, British Columbia, Canada. Her research focuses on the intersection between nationalism studies and island studies. She specialises in comparative studies and has published books and articles on Puerto Rico, American Samoa and Newfoundland.

# Anachronistic Progressivism: Advancing Sovereignty through Monarchy - The story of the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean

R. Georges Gardinetti & Valérie Vézina

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the story of the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean where a popular referendum resulted in the first and only North American municipal monarchy. Many questioned whether this was a publicity stunt; for Denys Tremblay, aka King Denys I, it represented much more than that. Moreover, as a living performance piece it challenged people's perspectives on nationalism, sovereignty, and democracy. King Denys I applied his own personal touch to the project which sought to attract people to the region as well as show what could be done within the limits of the status quo. Though the monarchy was short-lived, it achieved what decades of separatist politics could not in Québec: the establishment of a sovereign sub-unit of a democracy without contravening its constitution.

### **KEYWORDS**

micronations, sovereignty, nationalism, L'Anse-Saint-Jean, Québec

In 1997, after a popular referendum, the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean was established. Its first (and only) monarch, Denys I, was crowned King of the municipal monarchy. Both the political and economic context that led to the rise (and fall) of the Kingdom will be addressed by analyzing Québec's place within the Canadian federation, and how the articulation of nation building in the micronation of L'Anse-Saint-Jean took place. A specific analysis of the monarchy, its King, and its symbols will lead to how the Kingdom was portrayed by the political elites in Québec and by the media. Finally, a discussion on why the Kingdom failed will take place. In conclusion, a review on what this micronation reveals about claims of sovereignty, economic revival, and popular support will be made.

### Micronations: Navigating Sovereignty

Micronations are interesting entities. They are often mocked (Giuffre; Grydehøj; Hayward "In a Stew") or ignored by governments and international organizations (Sawe). Hayward defines micronations as "[places] that have been declared independent by individuals or groups despite the minimal likelihood of their being recognised as independent by any established nation state or international body" ("Islands and Micronationality" 1). Sawe even goes as far as to say that a micronation "is not recognized by any other government or major international organization." Nevertheless, claims of micronationality are ever more present and there are more than 400 micronations that have been recorded (Sawe; Robson). Some are more famous than others. A recent Netflix movie portrayed the story of the Republic of Rose Island, a short-lived micronation on a man-made platform. The Principality of Sealand also has gathered a lot of attention throughout the years. Other island micronations include Forvik, the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands, and North Dumpling Island. But micronations have taken many forms, such as peninsulas (the Royal Republic of Ladonia or Liberland for example), international territories, such as Antarctica (the Grand Duchy of Westarctica) and enclaves already claimed by a sovereign country (the Principality of Serboga or the Republic of Molossia for example). As Furnues points out, micronations exist for many reasons such as personal entertainment, artistic ventures, tourist attractions, and signs of protest. If the most famous cases of micronations are making territorial claims, the internet has led to two tendencies:

With the rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, existing and aspirant micronations and micronationalists found both a forum through which to publicise their claims and, increasingly in the 2000s, a stage for the creation of fanciful micronational entities in locations that claimants did not need to *visit* (let alone *occupy*) in order to claim micronational status for (and/or claim an individual's right to be ruler of). (Hayward, "Islands and Micronationality" 3; italics in the original)

Those phenomena have hence moved micronations from "tiny countries declared by ordinary people" (Lattas 62) to places, real or not, where curious kinds of sovereignty are taking place. In fact, micronations can pose a threat and impugn the classical notion of sovereignty. In political terms, a territory is usually a "geographical area belonging to or under the rule of government" (Sullivan 514). To that territorial notion is usually added the group of people who live on that land, political institutions, recognition by other similar entities (also called states) and this form the classical definition of the Westphalian state. However, more and more this conceptualization is called into question. The territory can no longer be seen only as a tangible, fixed piece of land; it also needs to be seen as a symbolic social and political creation (Agnew). In other words, the territory is moving out of territoriality. Furthermore, globalization has led to a borderless world in terms of economic and trade exchanges where state supremacy is diminished. Some even talk about panarchy, which separates geographical location from citizenship similar to religion, which is separated from a clear geographical location, especially in democracies (Tucker and Bellis; Furnues). Hence, it is not surprising that micronations emerge and take form in both territorial and virtual environments. Regardless of whether micronations exist physically or take on a virtual form, there is "always a performance, the declaration of independence" (Lattas 63) to assert to its real or imagined claimed audience. Interestingly, as both territorial or non-territorial entities, micronations are formed with their own institutions, governments, flags, and various other symbols (Robson; Furnues).

In the specific case of the municipal Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean, this micronation stands out not as an island, nor as a virtual entity, but as anchored in a specific geographical location that was declared sovereign after a popular referendum, increasing its legitimacy as the first municipal kingdom in Canada (and more broadly, North America).

### L'Anse-Saint-Jean: A Micronation and Municipal Kingdom

Before looking specifically at the claims of independence of the micronation of L'Anse-Saint-Jean, it is crucial to understand its broader contextual environment. L'Anse-Saint-Jean is a municipality in the region of Saguenay, in the province of Québec, Canada (see map 1). L'Anse-Saint-Jean is not a bustling place. To drive there requires some 6 hours of travel from Montréal and 3 and a half hours from Québec City. The nearest airport is located in Saguenay approximately 100 km away and to the west. Founded in 1838, its population today is only some 1000 people. But what it lacks in vitality, it makes up for in history and in culture. Home to a ski resort that attracts people from all over Québec, it is considered by some to be the birthplace of the Saguenay region (Villeneuve). **Map 1** The Saguenay region (in red) within the province of Québec with the location of L'Anse-Saint-Jean. (Source: Wikipedia).



Québec is already unique in the Canadian federation in that it is the only province where a majority of the population's mother tongue is French. It is also the province that, especially since the 1960s, has openly affirmed itself as distinct from the rest of Canada. Québec has a long history of nationalist politics (See: Gagnon; Keating; Bouchard; Lamonde for more detailed history and analysis). Throughout its history, nationalism in Québec has evolved from a nationalism rooted in autonomy and religion to one actively promoted by institutions such as the Québec government and installing the French language as the tip of the spear. There is a long and ongoing debate as to whether or not nationalism is ethnic or civic/territorial, but one thing is certain: at the provincial level, all political parties promote some form of nationalism (Bélair-Cirino & Crête). Some parties (Parti Québécois and Québec solidaire) advocate for independence, while others (Parti Libéral du Québec and Coalition Avenir Québec) promote more autonomy within the Canadian state. Québec's claims for distinctiveness have undoubtedly shaped the Canadian federation. In 1980, Québec held a first referendum on sovereignty where ultimately 60% of the population rejected the idea. This led the federal government, under Pierre Elliot Trudeau, to patriate the Constitution, add a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and install French and English as official languages in the hope all this would quell Québec's claims for independence. But denial of, among other things, "distinct society" status for the province in the Constitution, led to Québec's abstention from the endorsement of the Constitution. Several subsequently unsuccessful attempts to "bring Québec into the constitutional fold" were made in the early 1990s (Séguin). The failures of both the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional accords ultimately led to the second referendum on sovereignty in Québec in 1995 (see: Stein; Watts; Gagnon). Although the "no" vote prevailed, it only did so by the slightest margin (official counts were as follows: 50.58% voted against, while 49.42% voted in favour). The Saguenay region where L'Anse-Saint-Jean is located was overwhelmingly in favour of independence with 73% of the population supporting separation (Elections Québec). Not surprisingly, when the residents of L'Anse-Saint-Jean

# Nation building and independence in the micronation of L'Anse-Saint-Jean

The Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean's story can appear to be little more than a folksy promotional stunt. The town, after all, garnered national attention when its King's coronation was broadcast on the Cable Public Affairs Channel (commonly referred to simply as CPAC). The fanfare and pageantry of the event certainly added fuel to the argument that it was all for marketing. Closer analysis, however, reveals additional layers to the project. According to its principal author, Denys Tremblay, the entire premise was that it would be an artistic endeavor with several ulterior motives.

Denvs Tremblay was born in Chicoutimi, Québec in 1951. He became a professor of art at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi at 26 years old and later earned a PhD in plastic art from the Université Paris-VIII-Vincennes in 1987. He began developing different artistic ideas about sovereignty following the failed 1980 Québec referendum on separation (Tremblay). One idea was "L'Illustre Inconnu" which translates into English as "the nobody from nowhere." First embodied in an April 14th, 1983 performance at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, this "Illustre Inconnu" character would be an alter ego for Tremblay to use in a number of "more real that real" roles that mixed history, fiction, and art. It would eventually become the canvas for the future project of the King of L'Anse-Saint-Jean. As to why such a character was needed, Tremblay believed that before territorial recovery could occur, a people must first symbolically express their nationalism in the same way that indigenous peoples of Canada have done (Tremblay). Out of this belief came the idea for a Francophone Kingdom (and King) that would reawaken the historical colonial foundations of Québec's people and manifest national sovereignty.

In a 2017 CBC interview, Tremblay revisits what led to the creation of a sovereign kingdom and admits that initially he had been asked to determine whether a work of art could be commissioned and used as a way to turn a winter ski resort into a four-season destination. The idea for a kingdom emerged out of chance when there were no celebrities deemed to possess enough star power to attract people to the area. Tremblay saw an opportunity to create one, or rather develop one that in fact already existed. Tremblay had been performing the role of a local sovereign (the *Illustre Inconnu*) in community-level theatrical performances. And so, the task at hand was fused with Tremblay's fictitious world in an undertaking that showed just how creatively one can pursue nationalism without conflict.

To assess the creation of the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean as something more than a brilliant marketing campaign, it is useful to measure the extent to which it conforms to more serious attempts at sovereignty, nation building, and autonomy. Firstly, symbolism can measure hidden or implicit intentions. The use of symbols and symbolism is central to nation building (Jayet). It follows then that the creation of symbols for the nascent Kingdom would help legitimize it. From art, to currency, and regalia, the effort was nothing short of earnest. Tremblay chose a "spiritual didgeridoo" to represent that without an army he could only use the power of his voice to convince people. There was also a two-handled sword symbolizing peace instead of war (see Fig. 1).



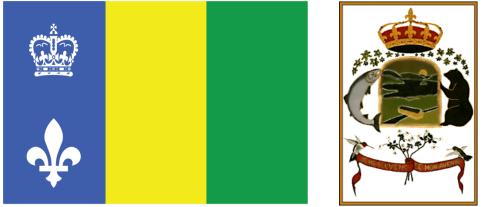
There was even a national anthem written that evokes patriotism and identity themes. Javet cites evidence that using flags and symbolism to portray power is something that predates the existence of the nation state and constitutes a powerful instrument of unity. In his famous work entitled Banal Nationalism, Michael Billig asks rhetorically "why do 'we' in established, democratic nations, not forget 'our' national identity? The short answer is that 'we' are constantly reminded that 'we' live in nations: 'our' identity is continually being flagged" (93). For Billig, in established nations, the mere flag would not be sufficient, but it is not surprising that for newly created nations, such as the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean, symbols, such as the flag, are one of the first thing being displayed in order to establish the nation in a way. Even without in-depth vexillological knowledge, one can plainly see that the Kingdom's flag speaks to Québec's influence; the use of the same blue and white colour and the inclusion of a fleur-de-lys, leaves little doubt as to the Kingdom's broader allegiances (see Fig. 2). Yellow and green are the main colours of the flag of Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean; the yellow representing the fields and agriculture and the green for the continents. Combined with the knowledge of Denys I's sociopolitical intentions, the case can be made that the creation of the Kingdom's symbols was not merely an exercise in artistic creativity. The Coat of Arms for the Kingdom gives still more insight into the project's greater purpose: the slogan "Je me souviens de mon avenir" ("I remember my future") is quite obviously a play on Québec's "Je me souviens" ("I remember") (see Fig. 3). It is somewhat ironic that the financing for all of the Kingdom's jewels and regalia came from the Canada Council, an organization whose primary aim is to advance the promotion, study and production of works of art. Nevertheless, the quality and volume of symbolism acts as an endorsement of the micronational effort as legitimate.

Fig. 1 King Denys I's regalia. This is evidence of his attention to detail and his commitment to the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean. (Source: Réseau Art Actuel)

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**Fig. 2** (left) Flag of the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean. Source: Roi de l'Anse.

**Fig. 3** (right) The Coat of Arms of the Kingdom. Source: Roi de l'Anse

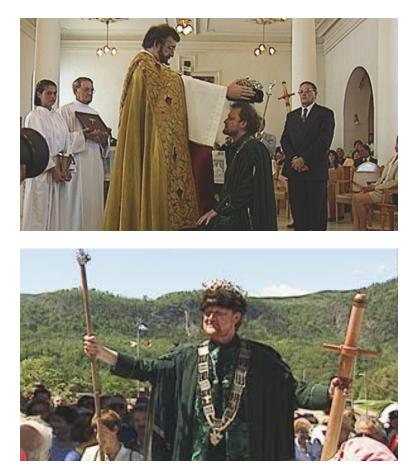


A second measure of genuine nation-building behavior is the degree to which a territory is autonomous. Territorial autonomy is defined by Ghai as "a device to allow ethnic or other groups claiming a distinct identity to exercise direct control over affairs of special concern to them, while allowing the larger entity those powers which cover common interests" (cited in Barter 299). Barter offers an especially close look at Québec which constitutes a case of autonomy that benefits both the supranational entity and the national one simultaneously. Whether the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean meets Barter's criteria is up for debate. At his crowning, King Denys I called on the Queen of Canada, Queen Elizabeth II (who was coincidentally on an official trip to Newfoundland and Labrador, a nearby Canadian province) to accept his monarchy as being distinct from hers and thereby assenting to the sovereignty of L'Anse-Saint-Jean (and more broadly, Québec's sovereignty) without the legal complications of separating from Canada. The Queen neither acknowledged nor replied to this demand. Lasting less than three years, the Kingdom was allowed to operate mostly unfettered by the provincial and federal governments of the day and to date it is still the only municipal monarchy in North America in recorded history. Surprisingly, the Kingdom faced an early challenge from its own citizens when it had to overcome an effort to overthrow the King and install a mayor. This challenge showed the limits of the monarchy's power. Denys I was subject to the will of the people notwithstanding his royal highness's position at the head of the proverbial table. In terms of accomplishments, the reign of Denys I was uneventful but for fundraising efforts toward an arboreal installation meant to increase tourism in the region and boost the local economy. There were no efforts to amend laws, there was no attempt at gaining more power.

Lastly, a consideration of whether Denys I and the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean stood as a proxy for Québec at large following unsuccessful attempts at independence from Canada is merited. That Denys I and the municipality were able to declare *de jure* a municipal monarchy is an important point. Unlike the province, this micronation had successfully declared independence by democratic vote. Denys I was no fool; recall that he earned a PhD in Art at the Université Paris-VIII-Vincennes. The question that remains largely unanswered is whether or not he intended this to be political in addition to an artistic endeavour.

It is worth noting that the marketing aspect of this micronational project was not merely for capitalistic reasons. In 1996 the Saguenay region was devastated by a flood that killed 10 people, destroyed some 800 homes, displaced 16,000 Gardinetti & Vézina 59 people, and caused in excess of \$300 million worth of damages in a region that could scarce afford it (CBC). In the blink of an eye, hundreds of years of history and homes were washed away; but it also offered the region a fresh start. It is in this context that Denys Tremblay was asked to help revive L'Anse-Saint-Jean.

The referendum and subsequent crowning of Denys I as King of L'Anse-Saint-Jean got a lot of traction in the media. The referendum asking residents of L'Anse-Saint-Jean if they agreed to have "L'Illustre Inconnu" named King of their municipality happened on January 21, 1997 and passed with 73.9% of the vote. Months later, on June 24, 1997, a symbolic date, as it is Saint-Jean-Baptiste day, a national holiday in Québec, Denys I was crowned King of L'Anse-Saint-Jean. The crowning was nothing short of majestic (see Figs. 4 and 5). The ceremony, held in the local church and headed by the priest, attracted more than 1,500 people and some 200 journalists and media representatives from around the world including Japan, Britain, the United States and many other countries.



Following the referendum results, the Canadian and local media portrayed the event and the King in two ways; either as an eccentric man or as an artist ready to help his village and region to gain attraction. There was a strong diversity of views, but as Grydehøj reminds us: "An element of comedy is often present when discussing micronations" (35). The referendum and subsequent crowning of the King of L'Anse-Saint-Jean did not escape the satirized portrait. For example, following the referendum results, on the National, on CBC television (a Pan-Canadian newscast), the following was depicted:

**Fig. 4** The crowning of King Denys I - media from around the world witnessed the event. (Source: Radio-Canada).

**Fig. 5** King Denys I with his 'subjects'. (Source: Radio-Canada).

Tremblay plans to use the money to support his pet project: building a kilometre-long environmental sculpture on the hills around town. The idea of attracting tourists to see his art excites Tremblay, even if being a king seems more of a pain than a pleasure. "I have to be nice all the time" he says, "and I guess I can never again have one drink too many in public." Well, such are the burdens of royalty. (CBC).

Perhaps cynically, the media was quick to point out the inherent contradiction in terms of a municipal monarchy. As reported by Lynn Moore in the *Gazette*: "Meanwhile, reporters on this continent wondered why a municipality in a separatist stronghold of Québec would choose an institution that the citizens of France killed off long ago" (Moore A3).

For all the Kingdom did to legitimize itself, it was seldom seen as more than a curiosity or sideshow meant to raise funds for the rebuilding effort following the devastation of the 1996 flooding. More telling than what political leaders said was what they did, or rather did not. There were no legislative responses to restrict or prevent pretenders from following a similar path. The response of various contributors to the effort to construct the effigy of John the Baptist at the very least suggests that the Kingdom was trustworthy enough to raise nearly 1 million dollars in public and private monies. It is sadly ironic, therefore, that its ultimate undoing proved to be the citizens of the Kingdom who themselves stood to benefit from the potential increase in tourism. Anglophone reception was tepid at best and openly scornful at worst. William Johnson, a well-known advocate of anglophone rights and writer for the *Globe and Mail*, impugned the Kingdom, its King, and the federal government for funding what he saw as bad use of public funds (Johnson).

As is often the case in any form of government, governance proved difficult especially when it came to the use of public money. The King wanted to create a forest sculpture of John the Baptist in the vast forests around L'Anse-Saint-Jean. The John the Baptist sculpture idea had \$250,000 in financial backing from the Canada Council contingent on matching funds from local government and businesses. Just as the "living fresco" of John the Baptist project was about to materialize, a group of local citizens took issue with contributing \$100,000 of municipal money to the development thereof. People in the community accused the King of megalomania and many locals were doubtful that the money raised for the artistic and ambitious project of the Kingdom was going towards it. Some even accused the King of embezzling the funds earmarked for the art project. However, Denys I always maintained that he did not earn any money and had to keep his teaching job while being King (Porter). Those opposed to the use of funds for the sculpture succeeded in electing municipal councillors who thereafter blocked the municipal funding of the project, which resulted in the withdrawal of the Canada Council's financial backing and left the project in limbo. When challenged, Tremblay insisted that he intended the monarchy to be a vehicle for the promotion of the region and an unpaid articulation of his artistic ambitions. King Denys I, without the funds to continue his artistic project, and facing ever increasing backlash from the community, decided to abdicate after three years on the throne on January 14, 2000. Though the coverage was minimal compared to the coronation, the abdication was reported on by various media outlets. The

abdication ceremony was attended by only the priest, the town mayor, and two witnesses. Still, that a ceremony took place underscores how much this project meant to Denys Tremblay. "The first monarch of L'Anse-St-Jean, King Denys I, has abdicated his throne without naming a successor to rule over the town in Québec's Saguenay region.", reported Jack Branswell in the *Expositor*. Alas, as all rulers (democratic or monarchist) realise, economic realities can often undermine their legitimacy and in this instance revealed that even a modern monarchy, as progressive as the idea nay have been, faced the same political challenges that all democratic municipalities face when it comes to deciding how to spend scarce tax dollars.

#### Conclusion

Micronations are fascinating places, whether physical or virtual, their goals vary: from claims of sovereignty to artistic projects. They teach and show us how concepts of sovereignty are malleable, but also how the power of individuals to be together, to create, to innovate can lead to change. Denys Tremblay's Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean project was more than simply creating a monarchy. It was designed to revive the economy and tourism in a region that had been devastated by a massive flood. The Kingdom had a King, royal titles, an anthem, a flag, it even had its own currency. The King's artistic vision was ambitious, but it showed that the power of creativity can be a powerful catalyst for a micronational endeavour. Years after his abdication, Denys Tremblay, who still refers to himself as King on occasion, reflected on the brief Kingdom and mused that it was a way to symbolically declare independence, his way of saying "Yes we can" (Porter) to borrow retroactively from Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. It accomplished something the province of Québec never could, and though the Kingdom no longer exists, its memory glows warmly in the history of la Belle Province. The kingdom may have been short-lived, but L'Anse-Saint-Jean is today recognized as one of the most beautiful villages in Québec and people still speak fondly of their former King. Reality is sometimes truly stranger than fiction.

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