

# Quebec and the democratic deficit

I met Jean Chrétien only once in my life, during the 1974 federal electoral campaign in Iqaluit, then Frobisher Bay. I had a summer job there with Bell Canada, and Mr. Chrétien came to town to shore up the local Liberal candidate. He was his usual political self: enthusiastic, energetic, easily accessible, deploying all the skills that made him a formidable campaigner. I did not dislike the man. Quite frankly, I still don't. This being said, his Canada was not mine, and his way of dealing with Quebec was, in my view, unenlightened and fraught with dangers for our common future.

## 1995 REFERENDUM: A SQUEAKER

Dealing with the Quebec file, Jean Chrétien was plain lucky. From my perspective, he was wrong in his efforts with Pierre Trudeau to patriate the constitution without the consent of Quebec, and even more imprudent in his concerted association with all those who undid the Meech Lake Accord. His punishment was three consecutive majority governments, a divided opposition, and more power for a decade than most democratic leaders around the world. Luck fell squarely on his side during the fateful Quebec referendum of 1995. His performance was miserable: careless planning, uncharacteristically awkward campaigning, and a loss of nerve during the last days prior to October 30. His side won by the narrowest of margins.

Space here is restricted, so nuances will have to be argued elsewhere. Canada was not nearly lost in October 1995. However, a dangerous political crisis was averted. What Jacques Parizeau and Jean Chrétien have told us since the referendum, add up to illustrate how dangerous our political circumstances would have been. Canada was not nearly lost, but Jean Chrétien's political career was nearly saved.

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quintessential political survivor. He barely outran the shadow of his political death and was forever transformed by the experience. From this angle, Jean Chrétien's fate in 1995 resembles Pierre Trudeau's in 1980. Having announced his retirement, Trudeau came back from political death to win the February 1980 federal election. A resolute man if ever there was one, Trudeau was even more steadfast after he came back in his desire to carry the day against his arch-rivals, the separatists from Quebec. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same logic can be applied to Jean Chrétien in 1995.

Jean Chrétien's luck was extended by Mr. Parizeau's own loss of nerve on the night of the referendum, and by the strategic miscalculations of the sovereigntist establishment in Quebec. Parizeau's speech had three consequences: internally polarizing Quebec even more, providing the Rest-of-Canada with an easy excuse for not seriously considering the failings of the political regime, and giv-

ing Quebec an ugly black eye at the altar of international public opinion. Devising and implementing a plan to exploit these three consequences is essentially what the apparatuses of the Canadian state, led by Mr. Chrétien, accomplished after 1995, in three ways.

## THE POLITICAL FALLOUT

First, the threat to partition an independent Quebec was affirmed in 1996 and re-stated in the debate surrounding the *Clarity Act*. Ottawa reserves itself the right to assess the quality of a clear majority, following daily events in the streets of Quebec, in the days and weeks following a referendum. This means the rule of law if necessary, but not necessarily the rule of law. This is "reason of state" of the first magnitude. Our politically resurrected prime minister really meant to save the nation at all costs.

Second, Mr. Chrétien's government aggressively promoted a new rhetoric, promoting Canada as it currently stands; open only to minor reforms at the margins of the political system. Rest-of-Canada public opinion, along with the media and intellectual elites, was for many years after the referendum quite receptive to this new discourse. In the edited volume that followed the 2002 International Conference on Federalism, held in August 2002 in St-Gallen, Switzerland, Raoul Blindenbacher and Ronald Watts outlined the institutions and principles that should be present in the practices and processes of federal regimes. I will enumerate here only three of these principles:

- Non-centralization as a principle expressed through multiple centres of political decision making.
- Open political bargaining as a major feature of the way in which decisions are arrived at.
- The operation of checks and balances to avoid the concentration of political power.

## THE END OF THE NATIONALIST PROJECT

These principles, I would contend, were rather absent from the practices of the Chrétien governments, particularly after 1995. Provincial governments were given precious little legitimacy as centres of political decision making. Mr. Chrétien's ultimatum to the provincial premiers on the financing of health care says a lot about the absence during his mandate of a culture of dialogue and open bargaining. Finally, the referendum crisis with Quebec worked to strengthen the trend toward the greater concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister. For most people outside of Quebec, caught in a "nation-saving" mind-set, it did not matter at all.

Third, the dramatic results on referendum night, coupled with Mr. Parizeau's widely publicized remarks, had a huge impact on the evolution of the Canada-Quebec game. Suddenly, the international community, and the major power centres within it, became keen observers. On this stage, it was simply no contest between Ottawa and Quebec City. Fully awakened by the great scare of October 30, the Canadian state led by Mr. Chrétien firmly decided to use all the considerable foreign policy means at the disposal of Ottawa to fight Quebec's drive toward sovereignty in bilateral relations and multilateral forums. All in all, seen from the perspective of late 20th century world politics, Canada's accomplishments on issues such as peace making, multiculturalism and human rights, vaunted by the resources of the Canadian state, have persuaded more people beyond our borders than the critical vision of our political regime argued by sovereigntist circles.

## POST-REFERENDUM POLITICS

Sheer luck provided Mr. Chrétien with an opportunity to devise a coherent post-referendum plan. Quebec City helped Mr. Chrétien by performing miserably. Cold logic requires coherence. The 1980 and 1995 Quebec referendums were forms of political rebellion. Whenever one rebels, it is with the premise that one

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will be stronger if he or she triumphs. Logically, this means accepting that one will be weaker if one suffers defeat, notwithstanding the narrowness of such a defeat. For the sovereigntists in Quebec, fully in control of the referendum process, the results on October 30 did not signify "near-victory." The difference of a few thousand votes meant a crushing defeat.

In the post-referendum strategic configuration, Ottawa held most of the trump cards, and it must be recognized that Mr. Chrétien played them brilliantly. He soon realized that the key global power circles, including those in Paris, were on his side, and he made sure that on this issue above all else, complete coordination and unity of resolve would exist between the central agencies, the PMO and PCO, and key departments such as Finance and Foreign Affairs. To the best of my knowledge, we have gotten so far only glimpses of this story.

In addition, mounting health costs in all provinces, particularly in a rapidly aging Quebec, joined with the need to put Ottawa's fiscal house in order by reducing deficit and debt, enabled Mr. Chrétien to deprive the governments of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry of the key financial pillars to their "winning conditions." This led to unintended consequences in all provincial capitals but, again, public opinion was firmly on Mr. Chrétien's side. A fair share of the monies thus saved by Ottawa was used to create many new national programs re-

lated to education, and to promote the Canadian national identity in every town and village of Quebec. The latter endeavour has enjoyed mixed results, if we can believe the monthly and obsessively computed figures provided by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada for the benefit of the Council for Canadian Unity.

## DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND THE CLARITY BILL

Bouchard and Landry helped Mr. Chrétien by not recognizing that there were some flaws in the referendum process controlled in Québec City. As it stands, a political party carrying an election with 40 percent of the vote, but with a majority in the National Assembly can impose its referendum will on the Assembly and on the whole people of Quebec. The existence of lacunae such as this one was skillfully exploited by the Chrétien government in the debate over the *Clarity Act*.

For the time being, this is my Jean Chrétien: imprudent throughout, lucky in the crunch, skillful and acting with cold and renewed resolve after 1995, a true Canadian nationalist rather than a federalist. With his departure from political power in 2003, coupled with the defeat of Bernard Landry, we lose the last big figures who carry all the scars of 40 years of our constitutional and identity struggles. It is just too early to say if this will lead to a new departure in the relationship between Canada and Quebec. 