

CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

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SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE: CANADA AFTER THE REFERENDUM

POST-REFERENDUM REFLECTIONS: SOVEREIGNTY IS ALIVE AND WELL, PARTNERSHIP REMAINS THE ROADMAP TO THE FUTURE

BY DANIEL TURP

The disconcerted voices and messages sent to Quebecers from the rest of Canada and the hope that Mr. Bouchard, following his November 21 announcement, will become the leader of the Parti québécois merit examination. Many Quebecers believe that the sovereigntist option is alive and well. Such a belief is also founded on the referendum results and the shifting roles in Ottawa and Quebec City.

EXAMINING THE RESULTS OF THE OCTOBER 30 REFERENDUM

No serious analyst from Quebec, Canada, or, indeed, the rest of the world has misread the October 30 referendum results. As can be seen from the

table (see page 42), 49.42 percent of those Quebecers who cast valid ballots voted "yes" to a question that would have authorized the National Assembly of Quebec to proclaim Quebec sovereignty. By contrast with the 1980 referendum question, which would have given no such mandate to the government of Quebec, the vote of October 30 is a clear indication that Quebecers seriously considered the option of sovereignty and almost gave it a majority in 1995.

With a question that was more daring, there was an 8.98 percent increase in support for the Yes side (49.42 percent in 1995 versus 40.44 percent in 1980) and such an increase is

reflected in all age groups. Hence, of those aged 18 to 34, the "yes" voters were 51 percent in 1980 and 55 percent in 1995; of those aged 35 to 54, the "yes" voters were 51 percent in 1980 and 52 percent in 1985; and of the people over age 55, the "yes" voters were 28 percent in 1980 and 32 percent in 1995. Regarding the geographic distribution of the vote, one must realize that the "yes" vote was

in the majority in 80 of the 125 ridings of Quebec (64.00 percent), whereas it had won only 22 out of 110 ridings in 1980 (24.20 percent). The obvious consequence of this progression of the Yes side is the equivalent loss of the No side. The decrease from 59.56 percent to 50.58 percent, the losses in all age groups, and the new geographical voting patterns are of

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FACING REALITY (AND THE NEXT REFERENDUM)

BY JEFF ROSE

On October 30, Canada came within 50,000 votes of national disintegration. As federalists face up to that reality and begin planning for the next referendum, here are some considerations they might bear in mind.

THE PROMISE OF CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

First, however ill-advised those pledges may have been, failure

to come through on the federalist leaders' recent promises of constitutional change could engender bitterness in Quebec, virtually guaranteeing majority backing for the separatists in the next referendum.

Parliament should, therefore, take the first step toward fulfilling the leaders' promises, ideally before Christmas. This

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RESULTS OF THE 1980 AND 1995 REFERENDUMS

Year	Registered voters	Yes (% of valid votes)	No (% of valid votes)	Spoiled (% of votes)	Total votes (and % of participation)	Total valid votes (and % of valid votes)	Majority
1980	4,367,584	1,485,851 (40.44%)	2,187,991 (59.56%)	65,012 (1.74%)	3,738,854 (85.61%)	3,673,842 (98.26%)	"No" 702,230 (19.12%)
1995	5,087,009	2,308,360 (49.42%)	2,362,648 (50.58%)	86,501 (1.82%)	4,757,509 (93.52%)	4,671,008 (98.18%)	"No" 54,288 (1.16%)

great significance and a great cause for concern for federalists in Quebec and Canada.

When it comes to linguistic patterns of voting, one must emphasize that nearly 60 percent of francophones voted "yes" in 1995 compared with 48 percent in 1980. By contrast, the anglophones of Quebec voted almost unanimously for the No side (95 percent), whereas the allophone population of Quebec also voted overwhelming against the sovereignty proposal (92 percent). Yet the support for sovereignty in the allophone population increased since 1980, especially in areas such as the Latin American community, 44 percent of whose members voted "yes."

THE CONSEQUENCE OF A "YES" VOTE

Some politicians, and one can think of the prime minister of Canada, have attempted, and will continue to attempt, to discredit the formulation of the referendum question and to suggest that Quebeckers did not understand the consequences of voting "yes" and did not believe that voting "yes" on October 30 meant that Quebec could become a sovereign country. Furthermore, such a paternalistic attitude is an insult to the intelligence of Quebec voters. It fails to mention that the agreement that was signed by the leaders of the Yes forces on June 12, 1995, which was sent to every Quebec household

more than one month before the referendum, clearly states that the common project would lead to the accession of Quebec to sovereignty.

It is also disrespectful to Mr. Parizeau, his longstanding commitment and emphasis on sovereignty, and his insistence throughout the campaign that a "yes" vote would allow Quebec to proclaim its sovereignty within one year after the vote. It ignores the very clear declaration of Mr. Bouchard, reported in the last days of the campaign in a major headline of Montreal's major French language newspaper, *La Presse*, that a "yes" vote clearly signified that Quebec would become a sovereign nation. Furthermore, it neglects, among other things, the fact that the federalists' main campaign theme was "No to Separation," and that the prime minister of Canada, on several occasions, and in particular during his address to "the nation" on October 25, told Quebeckers that voting "yes" was an "irrevocable" decision to leave Canada.

This transparency on the issue of sovereignty is not affected by the fact that sovereignists were also proposing that Quebeckers present a formal offer of partnership to Canada. To depict this offer as muddying the waters and solely as a dishonest trick to fool Quebeckers is simply to ignore the consistent attempt of sovereignists to devise a project

whereby the newly acquired sovereignty of Quebec would accommodate itself to a form of association or partnership with the rest of Canada. Quebeckers themselves have been adamant in telling the government of Quebec, through regional and national commissions on the future of Quebec, that they wanted to maintain formal links with Canada in the event of sovereignty. They were also well aware in 1995 that the conclusion of a partnership agreement was not a condition of the proclamation of sovereignty, contrary to what had been proposed by the government of Quebec in 1980. Thus, one cannot and should not blame sovereignists for their decision to obtain from Quebeckers not only an authorization to proclaim sovereignty, but a mandate, consistent with the wishes of Quebeckers themselves, to offer an economic and political partnership to the rest of Canada.

Rather than making patronizing comments on the sense of the votes of 2,308,360 persons who voted "yes" to the 1995 referendum question, federalists should reflect on the reasons for their narrow victory and mainly follow up with those promises that probably allowed them to win this referendum, albeit by a 1.16 percent margin. Those promises, which some commentators now suggest should never had been

made, were to change Canada to accommodate Quebec, a discourse reminiscent of the promises made by Pierre Elliott Trudeau during the 1980 referendum. Yet the promises made by Jean Chrétien to Quebeckers seem even more explicit than those of his former mentor and announce a shifting of roles on the Canada-and-Quebec political agenda for the coming months.

THE SHIFTING ROLES IN CANADA AND QUEBEC

The government of Canada has embarked on a perilous journey, a journey toward reforming Canadian federalism and most likely the Canadian Constitution, in order to satisfy the demands of Quebec federalists and deliver on their promises of the final days of the referendum. Those who steadily repeated during the election campaign and their two first years in office that such reforms were unnecessary have thus been forced to navigate in deep and troubled waters. Those who probably knew that such reform was doomed to failure, and for that reason avoided tackling the authentic and real problems of Canadian federalism, must now come up with a set of proposals to satisfy their referendum promises.

These referendum promises concern the recognition of Quebec as a distinct society, a veto for Quebec over future constitutional changes, and the de-

centralization of powers. On all these issues, consensus in the rest of Canada is far from evident, as was witnessed during the first days that followed the October 30 referendum. Hence, on the distinct society clause, it was evident that the Reform Party would oppose the constitutional recognition, even if it was of a symbolic nature and of no real consequence. The recognition of a veto for Quebec also seemed to meet with fierce opposition in the rest of Canada. And, finally, on the issue of decentralization, there was no clear indication of the path that the federal government was planning to follow; it is quite obvious, however, that the Liberal government could not espouse the claims for a real devolution of powers to Quebec, but could only revive the Charlottetown proposals on redefining roles and responsibilities of legislatures and governments in those areas that already come under provincial jurisdiction and had been the subject of the federal spending power.

DISTINCT SOCIETY AND QUEBEC'S VETO

In any case, these promises appear to be far removed from Quebec's real claims. The distinct society clause has exhausted its potential and appears to be moot today. Even the former leader of the Liberal Party of Quebec and a committed federalist, Claude Ryan, is calling for the recognition of Quebec as a "people." The formula that seemed to have been devised by the federal government and that would have granted a veto to the people of Quebec on future changes to the Canadian Constitution, rather than to the National Assembly, would meet great opposition in Quebec and be seen as trespassing on the rights of the National Assembly. It would not deal with the thorny issue of the changes made to

the Constitution of Quebec in 1982 without Quebec's consent. That remains, according to Michel Bélanger, one of the key figures of the No committee, and to the former prime minister of Quebec, Robert Bourassa, a problem that needs to be addressed and solved in order to bring Quebec back in the Canadian family. And as far as decentralization is concerned, only a massive real and constitutional transfer of cultural, social, and economic powers to the Quebec National Assembly will be acceptable to Quebecers, who are, as shown in poll after poll, including one taken after the October 30 referendum, repeatedly claiming such a transfer.

And while the rest of Canada will be debating the Constitution and trying to find a way out of "la quadrature du cercle" with leaders such as Jean Chrétien, who have lost a great deal of credibility in Canada as a whole, Quebec City will be putting the emphasis on good governance and will endeavour to implement the 1994 election slogan, "l'autre façon de gouverner."

To tackle the deficit and debt problems, to revise the social safety net, to reform the education system, and to consolidate Quebec's culture, the government will look into imaginative and creative solutions and will not favour measures that will attack the integrity of a state that generations of Quebecers have proudly built and whose foundations should be reinforced. Equity and social solidarity shall blend with efficiency and economic responsibility in an effort to deal with those problems that affect the social fabric of Quebec, such as high unemployment among young people and women, child poverty, the accessibility and quality of health care, etc. These principles of governance and the first ideas for a program of government were sketched

on November 21 by Lucien Bouchard, whose credibility and prestige have been enhanced during the referendum campaign and who will exert the necessary leadership to implement these principles and ideas. Such principles and ideas will likely be well received by Quebecers, who should also be well informed on the impact of the decisions taken by the government of Quebec. They will expect, and rightly so, that participatory democracy should apply in these areas of decision making, just as they have applied in the matter of Quebec's political future.

THE NEXT STEPS

Good government will strengthen Quebec and give the government the necessary tools and legitimacy to obtain meaningful support from Quebecers to bring the Quiet Revolution to its logical political conclusion: sovereignty for Quebec. Although the rest of Canada might come up with a proposal of constitutional renewal of federalism, the competing proposal will still remain sovereignty and will most likely be the path preferred by Quebecers during a future referendum. And one should expect another referendum to occur most likely after a constitutional conference to be convened in 1997. No threats from the federal government could stop the drive for full autonomy of the people of Quebec or prevent them from deciding in a democratic fashion their political status.

Any attempt to thwart the process by which the Quebec National Assembly and government of Quebec ask Quebecers to decide on their future, be it through those powers of disallowance or reservation that have fallen into disuse or by any other means, would cast a shadow on the principle of democracy and bring Canada into disrepute in the world commu-

nity. And do not expect sovereigntists to forget about partnership with Canada — the belief in the advisability and interest of maintaining an economic and monetary union with Canada, and of going beyond such a union to look into forms of political partnership, will continue to be put forward as a means of preserving an authentic, albeit different, relationship with Canada. Do expect, however, that the architects of the partnership proposal will rethink and revise the blueprint contained in the June 12 agreement and will look into the comments, objections, and suggestions for improvements to the innovative formula put forward by the coalition of sovereigntist forces of Quebec.

The October 30 referendum has been a fascinating experience in participatory democracy and will likely be an important event in the history of Canada and Quebec. Quebecers have, once again, proved to be strategic voters and have told their government and the sovereigntist forces to refine their common project and to demonstrate that the government of Quebec could be ready to manage the affairs of a sovereign country. They might have also given the rest of Canada a last chance to overhaul the federal system to accommodate the long-lasting and traditional claims of Quebec, but they have, above all, told the rest of Canada to get ready for the next step, to absorb the shock of Quebec's forthcoming decision on sovereignty. ♦

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