

CLOSE, BUT NO CIGAR

BY REG WHITAKER

"A razor-thin margin."
"No — by a whisker."
"Too close for comfort."

The headlines and the TV one-liners said it all. The rest of Canada got the message, not least the politicians. Quebec almost voted for sovereignty. A clear majority of francophones voted for sovereignty. In the 15 years since the 1980 referendum, about 10 percent of the electorate has shifted from federalism to sovereignty. Just a few thousand more, and Canada would have been facing the vertigo of having to respond to a "yes" vote.

All this is true, and it is imperative that the rest of Canada keep these realities in mind. That said, a "no" is still a "no"; a defeat is still a defeat. As the old showbiz saying has it: "Close, but no cigar." Jacques Parizeau's astonishingly graceless — not to say tasteless — concession speech on referendum night, followed by his brutally swift resignation announcement less than 24 hours later, together encapsulate just how devastating the paper-thin defeat really was, both to the sovereigntists and to the sovereigntist project. They are weaker, much weaker, than the margin of the vote would indicate. Simple-minded projections of what will happen *à la prochaine* — the apparently irresistible rise of sovereigntist sentiment to eventual victory — suffer from the typical flaw of futurology, the tempting fallacy that the future will be like the present, only more so.

DECONSTRUCTING THE FUTURE

The political point of the referendum result remains the same, whatever the margin. The Yes option failed, and with that failure, the PQ is suddenly reduced

from the shepherd of historical change to just another provincial government. The BQ's shrinking is even more dramatic: from a sovereigntist sword in the federal Parliament, to a motley collection of MPs with no clear idea of why they are there, or what they have in common. With Lucien Bouchard heading to Quebec City to pick up after the departing Parizeau, the BQ will have lost their charismatic leader as well.

Could the PQ, as provincial government, not simply return to square one and start building for another referendum in 1997 or '98? The electoral law would have to be amended to permit a second referendum in the life of the same government, but the *péquisite* majority could easily take care of that. Technically, yes, it could be done. But practically, it is a non-starter. There is no way that any government can put a society through the emotional and economic wringer of a referendum on the fundamental nature of the political community year after year. But more pointedly — as the government of Quebec, the PQ has inescapable obligations to govern in the here and now, and not just to conjure up visions of the future. And since its behaviour from day one of its present mandate has been directed relentlessly toward the single goal of winning the referendum, it has, as a by-product of that campaign, created a potentially ungovernable mess that will make the launching of another sovereignty campaign a very risky venture indeed.

Central to the PQ's strategy has been the forging of social "solidarity." As Parizeau referred to it in his now infamous referendum night speech, "this

solidarity among generations, this solidarity among people from the right and the left, the solidarity among people from the union movement and the bosses, the unemployed and those who have jobs, all together." This corporatist dream has been glimpsed before, in the late 1970s when the first PQ government mobilized support for its sovereignty association referendum. After the referendum loss and the subsequent re-election of the PQ, the

Simple-minded projections of what will happen à la prochaine — the apparently irresistible rise of sovereigntist sentiment to eventual victory — suffer from the typical flaw of futurology, the tempting fallacy that the future will be like the present, only more so.

dream quickly fell apart as the government found itself putting a lid on social spending and legislating striking public sector workers back to work with Draconian severity, while slashing salaries by up to 20 percent — in short, acting just like any other provincial government.

NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY: FACT OR FICTION?

Then and now, this notion of solidarity is illusory because it is based on the dubious notion that nationalism can override all the material and ideological divisions of contemporary capitalist society, that everyone will sacrifice their own interests in favour of the collective good of the "nation" (as defined, of course, by

the PQ). Worse, it is fraudulent because it is bought momentarily by nothing more elevated than old-fashioned pie-in-the-sky political bribery. Lucien Bouchard actually spoke of sovereignty as a "magic wand" that would whisk away Quebec's problems — problems that face all contemporary societies and states. More concretely, the PQ, in its first year, assiduously worked at postponing any potential divisions by the simple expedient of buying off discontent. When public sector workers became restive, Parizeau simply threw money at them. When uneconomic firms like the MIL-Davie shipyard threatened shutdown, more money was thrown. No serious effort was made to reduce the provincial deficit because they wanted above all to avoid antagonizing any client groups prior to the referendum.

When it became apparent in the course of the year-long referendum campaign that despite the *péquistes'* best efforts, francophone business elites were by and large not very supportive of a leap into the sovereigntist dark, the PQ lurched leftward. In early October, Parizeau declared that with a "yes" vote, Quebecers will rise against the Quebec billionaires who built their fortunes on the backs of the province's people. "Now they spit on us. We are the ones who financed their projects," Mr. Parizeau said of Bombardier Inc. chief Laurent Beaudoin and Power Corp. president Paul Desmarais, who had warned that separation would threaten Quebec's prosperity: "My friends, we have to get out. If not, they will constantly kick our asses." However incredible such rhetoric might seem from a man once characterized as a "banker in banker's clothing," the Quebec labour movement was persuaded to throw their

Close, But No Cigar,
continued on page 22

CHOCK-A-BLOCK FEDERALISM: LESSONS FOR NEXT TIME *from page 20*

partnership. If Quebec goes, why should it be entitled to a special deal on a common passport, citizenship, or joint management of the economy? In theory, an independent Quebec is on its own "tout court." English-Canadian opinion makers ought to think again. The new factor that makes this an impossibility is the global economy and Canada's foreign indebtedness.

THE DEFINING MOMENT THAT NEVER WAS

All countries need to negotiate the terms of their interdependence. Sovereignty and independence are not absolutes. They evolve and change as conditions dictate. Federalists are fond of these words for good reason: for more than 30 years, Canada's two founding peoples have been trying to negotiate a new relationship, largely unsuccessfully. Now there is a new option on the table: partnership and new state structures. In almost winning the referendum, politically and morally, Quebec has created a level playing field on which to negotiate its independence with the rest of Canada *égal à égal*.

Even if this option remains undefined at the moment, the old constitutional game is over for good, no matter what initiatives Ottawa will propose. Ottawa can try to resurrect special status, tinker with the veto, and

propose more decentralization. But there are few takers. None of the provincial premiers have shown the slightest interest in any of these proposals. These

Federal strategy misfired because Ottawa continues to underestimate the intelligence of the Quebec voter and ignores the fact that politics and vision matter more than ever to ordinary Quebecers. This is why the federalist camp came so close to losing.

reform measures are yesterday's news headlines.

So what of the future? The final lesson is that the 1995 referendum held English Canada's feet to the fire in a way few could have imagined. No one should doubt for a moment that there will be a next time — a third referendum. In a non-crisis atmosphere, English Canada still has time to find ways to address the fundamental problem that has pushed the country to the edge.

Canada's constitutional crisis has two sides: symbolic and

real. The 1982 Constitution represents the worst of both worlds — a flawed process and an unsustainable text. It gave Canada's provincial premiers something they never had previously, a veto over all future constitutional reform; it raised provincial rights to an all-time high. Provincial rights were made more important than recognition of Quebec's status as a founding people. Before the constitutional changes of 1982, Quebec could veto constitutional changes that were relevant to it. It lost this as well.

It is not surprising that in these circumstances, there is no constitutional peace in Canada or in Quebec. A modern constitution sets the basic rules of the game for society and government, protects individuals from the misuse of power and authority, and recognizes the collective rights of the founders. Canada's 1982 constitutional accord fails to meet Quebec's needs. Worse still, it excludes Canada's First Nations. They were not at the table, nor part of any new beginning.

Finally, there is the democratic deficit. The "suits" made the Constitution; Canadians did not negotiate or ratify it. So the only hope for Canadians is to set things right, get back on track, and jettison the 1982 Constitution that has become the constant source of so much

rancour, division, and national bitterness.

Ending Canada's constitutional impasse requires a defining moment. At the giant flag-waving rally in Montreal, Chrétien could have used it for very different ends to refound Canada. This was the moment to tell Canadians and Quebecers that the 1982 Constitution had to be scrapped and that there would be new rules of the game for Quebec (transfer of powers, veto, national recognition), for Canada's First Nations (empowerment and entitlement), and a social charter (entrenchment of Canada's national programs and guarantees of social well-being and an alternative process of constitutional revision). The new constitution would have to be approved by popular vote in a referendum. None of this happened.

When the next referendum is held, Canadians need to remember this lost opportunity when Chrétien had the moral and political authority to move Canada forward. There is an important lesson here, too. Constitutional reform will succeed only by non-conventional means. There is no other way to build a level playing field inside Canada. ❖

Daniel Drache is director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and professor of political economy in the Department of Political Science at York University.

CLOSE, BUT NO CIGAR *from page 21*

support wholeheartedly into the "yes" campaign, on the promise that a sovereign Quebec would be a worker's paradise. The constitution of the new nation would be virtually written by labour representatives, along with women and youth groups and other social movements, and would enshrine social rights as the foundation of the state. So it was promised. It worked

in mobilizing these forces for the "yes" campaign, although not quite enough to win.

When Parizeau declared that sovereignty had been stolen from "us" by "money and the ethnics," he egregiously threw into a public spotlight a cruel reality for the sovereigntists. The "solidarity" they had tried to conjure up was a hoax — there was no solidarity between

"workers and bosses," "right and left." Worse, support for sovereignty stopped at the limits of the francophone community.

TOUGH CHOICES AHEAD

And now they must govern Quebec for the next three to four years. Despite campaign protestations that Quebec must be spared the right-wing assaults of Mike Harris's Ontario, there

are brutal fiscal realities and very tough choices facing the PQ government, choices that Mr. Parizeau has adroitly avoided by retirement, but that cannot be avoided by his successor. Only two days after the referendum result, the New York bond rating agencies were warning that Quebec had better get its fiscal house in order or face a downgrading of its credit sta-

tus (the warning was also to Ottawa, but there is no doubt where their primary attention will be focused). Quebec, it should be remembered, has one of the heaviest cumulative debt loads of any province. The "ma-

Despite campaign protestations that Quebec must be spared the right-wing assaults of Mike Harris's Ontario, there are brutal fiscal realities and very tough choices facing the PQ government, choices that Mr. Parizeau has adroitly avoided by retirement, but that cannot be avoided by his successor.

gic wand" of sovereignty would not, of course, have swept away this problem. Quite the contrary. But the wand, with its false promise, was broken on October 30. A PQ government, as a government rather than as an evangelical electoral entertainment, does not possess even a rhetorical alternative to combat the power of international capital in defining and confining the agenda of governments. Ask Bob Rae if you want to find out what happens to social democrats in provincial office. And to top it all off, soon the effects of Ottawa's downloading of costs for health and post-secondary education will be coming down the pipe.

A simple primer for the péquistes: the only real room for savings in provincial budgets is in health and education and, here, the primary scope is in the public sector wage bill. Labour solidarity will quickly dissolve when unionized workers find themselves the targets for cut-

backs and their job security down the drain. Social movements will shrink back in horror when, far from making new gains, as promised, they will likely see old programs and benefits, to which they believed themselves entitled, withdrawn or pared back. Off-loading costs to the municipalities (the dog-eat-dog mirror of what Ottawa is doing to the provinces) will gravely threaten the integrity of the decentralization and regionalization initiatives of the PQ, not to speak of intensifying ugly squabbles over ever-diminishing spending resources.

Of course, Mr. Bouchard could try wearing the premiership as nothing more than a decoration pinned to his chest, while singlemindedly pursuing his *neverendum*. This could be done only at the cost of economic catastrophe for the province. Or it could be done by plunging Quebec immediately into a second referendum, or, worse, a snap election that the PQ would attempt to treat as a sovereignty vote, presumably to be followed by a unilateral declaration of independence, even if they had won a plurality of seats with a minority of votes. To say that the latter options are high-risk scenarios would be a vast understatement. The more sensible course will be to try to provide what they promised in the last election campaign: sound, competent government of the province. But it is very difficult to see how they can emerge from the wrenching decisions that this will involve, with anything like the "solidarity" so artificially, and irresponsibly, constructed in the run-up to the referendum.

For the sovereigntist dream, October 30 may be a case of "so near, yet so far." Close, but no cigar. ♦

Reg Whitaker is professor of political science at York University.

EDITORIAL

SIX PRINCIPLES ON WHICH TO STRUCTURE A CANADIAN RESPONSE TO THE REFERENDUM

BY PATRICK J. MONAHAN

On May 14, 1980, Pierre Trudeau staked his and all Liberal Quebec MPs' seats on a pledge to effect constitutional renewal. Now Prime Minister Chrétien has made "change" the watchword of the 1995 No campaign.

Just as in 1980, some elements of "change" may need to wait until there is a federalist government in power in Quebec City, but what is included in the concept of change is easy to define. During the final days of the referendum campaign, the prime minister identified three items that his government would proceed with in the event of a "no" vote:

1. a recognition of the distinctive character of Quebec society;
2. a guarantee that no future constitutional changes that impinge on Quebec's powers will be made without Quebec's consent; and
3. devolution of powers to all provinces.

Some commentators have raised objections to the first two items on this list. On the one hand, the rest of Canada appears to be in no mood for a new "Quebec round" of constitutional negotiations. At the same time, the Quebec government has already indicated that it is unwilling to engage in any negotiations aimed at renewing federalism. Lucien Bouchard has described any further discussions about distinct society as "boring." The PQ strategy is to discredit any new "offers" from the rest of Canada, thus proving that Mr. Chrétien's promises of change during the

referendum were hollow and meaningless.

I have no quarrel with those who observe that reopening the constitutional file — and particularly the loaded phrase "distinct society" — is fraught with difficulty. My response is simply to observe that Mr. Chrétien

Regardless of the merits of these promises of constitutional change, the fact remains that they have been made. Either the promises will be honoured, or those who made them will pay the price.

tien made formal promises to the Quebec people that these matters would be addressed in return for a "no" vote. Some commentators in English Canada have criticized the PM for making these promises, and argued that a different referendum strategy would have produced a more successful outcome. The fact is, however, that had these promises not been made, it is very likely that the Yes side would have gone over the 50 percent mark on October 30 — a result that would have produced an economic and political meltdown across the country. In any event, regardless of the merits of these

Six Principles To Structure a Canadian Response to the Referendum, continued on page 24