

# THE NATIONALIST DILEMMA IN QUEBEC

BY ALAN CAIRNS

Lise Bissonnette, in her full-page October 26 *Le Devoir* editorial supporting a "yes" vote, succinctly summed up the ethnic dilemma confronting the sovereigntists. She recognized that a Yes victory could not only be constructed along "lines of cultural belonging" with anglophones, allophones, and aboriginal peoples voting "no" "en bloc," and with a majority of francophones voting "yes." The result, if the Yes side won, would be the imposition of a political order on well-established minorities who do not wish it and who feel profoundly Canadian. The necessary reconciliation to re-establish social cohesion, she observed, would not be easy. On the other hand, the enormous moral dilemma this posed was no more troubling than its converse, the blocking of the wishes of the founding majority by these same minorities and aboriginal nations.

The dilemma is fairly posed. It is useful, however, to draw out its analysis and implications in a series of propositions.

## CIVIC VERSUS ETHNIC NATIONALISM

Scholars and sovereigntists claim that the sovereigntist project is based on a territorial civic nationalism, or what several writers call liberal nationalism. This, however, is not reflected in its support. The constituency of sovereignty supporters extends only minimally beyond the Quebec francophone majority. Aboriginal nations, anglophones, and allophones are almost monolithically on the No side. In self-administered votes prior to the official referendum, the Inuit, Cree, and

Montagnais nations voted "no" by overwhelming majorities — 95, 96, and 99 percent, respectively. Anglophone and allophone "no"s were projected at 85-95 percent. In other words, Quebec reveals itself to be a deeply federal society.

The ethno-national cleavages on an issue of high symbolism such as sovereignty challenge the political cohesion of Quebec. In the lead-up to the referendum, such division generated apprehension, insecurity, and a partial self-silencing among the non-francophone communities. Further, if the francophone majority is frustrated in attaining its constitutional objective, some of its most passionate members are likely to scapegoat the non-francophone communities. If the frustration of the majority is repeated, anger and scapegoating may become institutionalized. The attribution of blame will be selective. Significantly, although francophone "no" voters vastly outnumbered the combined anglophone, allophone and aboriginal "no" voters, little finger-pointing by frustrated Yes leaders was directed at the former. It is, paradoxically, more legitimate for a francophone than for a non-francophone to vote "no."

When the majority in a federal society behaves as if it exists in a unitary state or a homogeneous society, the losers — if the population divides along ethno-national lines — will see the resulting decision as illegitimate. The conscription crises in WWI and WWII amply illustrate the point. Would aboriginal nations, and to a lesser extent anglophone and allophone

minorities, behave differently if francophone majoritarianism made them citizens of a country whose emergence they had almost unanimously opposed?

In a federal society, such as Quebec, the majority and the ethnic communities and aboriginal nations develop different historical memories. Minority memories of their unjust treatment are nourished and

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often embroidered by parties/organizations/governments that represent them — the PQ and the 1980-82 "betrayal" thesis, for example; or the Assembly of First Nations bitterly recalling in its publications and rhetoric the state-sponsored historical assault on Indian cultures. Memories of a referendum victory based on ethnic nationalism, and of the passions aroused in the campaign and its immediate aftermath, therefore, will not quickly go away.

## THE SOVEREIGNTISTS' DILEMMA: IS THERE A WAY OUT?

The sovereigntists, accordingly, are caught in an inescap-

able dilemma. Either they triumph by reinforcing their appeal to the francophone majority, with the resultant exacerbation of post-independence ethno-national cleavages, or they transform their project of society into one that seeks to transcend and appeal across the internal ethnic and aboriginal cleavages of a heterogeneous society.

Realistically, if vote calculations are paramount, Quebec francophone nationalism feeding on historic grievances attributed to the country-wide anglophone majority is the obvious engine to drive the independence movement. Is it then possible to build a post-independence civil society on the basis of a referendum whose support, reflecting its appeal, is confined to francophones? Lise Bissonnette's answer is "yes." The Quebec Charter, like its Canadian counterpart, strengthens the respect for individual rights and the protection of minorities, and it would be a central feature of an independent Quebec's constitutional culture. Further, for a Quebec finally finished with its obsessive quest for affirmation of its identity, she argues that the anglophones and allophones will no longer be living symbols of historic domination. More generally, according to Bissonnette, the ethnic nationalism that she agrees has recently flourished in Quebec is a perverse effect of Quebec's position in the federation, and the minimalist recognition that Canada is willing to offer.

Accordingly, her hypothesis is that the francophone majority in an independent Quebec will leave behind the ethnic nationalism that mobilized the Yes forces and also put its stamp on the independence campaign. Although this may be a some-

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Prime Minister's Office. The diehard opposition to any radical form of asymmetrical federalism is deeply entrenched.

### WILL THE FEDERALISTS EVER GET THEIR ACT TOGETHER?

More important, we are facing a prime minister who behaves as if he were the head of a unitary state. Consensus building does not appear to be anywhere near the federal government's agenda. In the House of Commons, chances are Preston Manning's Reform Party is destined to become the Official Opposition. If this happens, one can expect a flamboyant polarization between the Liberals and Reformists. This will serve only to show Quebecers a divided federalist camp united only by its refusal to grant Quebec any real special status.

The political leadership in English Canada is another wild card. The sheer mediocrity of most of these leaders, their utter lack of a sense of Canada, their staggering ignorance of Quebec, and their fascination with their own parochial short-term interests are a recipe for disaster from a federalist point of view. Those whom political scientist Daniel Latouche once branded "Kiwanis Club premiers" are destined to feed into

the implosion of Canada more rapidly than the sovereigntist movement ever could. Chances are they will prove unable to respond to the challenge put to them by the accumulation of decades of constitutional failures and of a growing dissatisfaction of many Quebecers.

Much more than an emotionally driven sense of rejection, it is these failures and this dissatisfaction that feed and strengthen the sovereignty movement. The failure to accommodate Quebec with a special status is what guarantees the continuing progression of the sovereignty option.

In Quebec, other than a revitalized PQ government, the provincial Liberal Party remains under Daniel Johnson a weakening factor for the federalists. Many nationalist federalist francophones could no longer identify with a vision that runs counter to the positions this party has taken for the past 35 years. Johnson's leadership has been gravely shaken by the referendum result and it is only a question of time before it is openly challenged. But if he steps down, he will have to do so quickly in order to allow his party to hunt down an effective Bouchard antidote.

In this, as in other related

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issues, time is of the essence. Hope is possible, many federalists say, because of the constitutional conference of 1997. What of it? The 1982 *Constitution Act* says the following in article 49:

A constitutional conference composed of the Prime Minister of Canada and the first ministers of the provinces shall be convened by the Prime Minister of Canada within fifteen years after this Part (V) comes into force to review the provisions of this Part.

Although this obligation has already been fulfilled through the negotiations leading up to Meech and Charlottetown, one could entertain the thought that for expediency, Prime Minister Chrétien might convene such a conference. It should, therefore, be noted that article 49 contains no obligations of a positive result and refers only to Part V, or the amending formula, and to no other part or section of the *Constitution Act*.

But if Jean Chrétien holds such a conference, the most probable outcome is failure. 1997 could reveal itself to be the ultimate proof of the incapacity of Canadian federalism to renew itself in a way satisfactory not only to Quebec, but to the other constituents of the Canadian political equation.

In this event, if none of this takes place and Jean Chrétien eventually decides to do absolutely nothing — which I find to be the most probable scenario — we are sure to be facing another referendum two or three years from now. ❁

*Josée Legault is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at the Université du Québec à Montreal and is a political columnist at Le Devoir.*

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what plausible prediction for the majority, the reciprocal assumption that the minority communities and aboriginal nations will forget is not credible. The practical question, therefore, is simple: Can the means of ethnic nationalism be the instrument for the goal of an independent Quebec whose allegiance is to be based on civic nationalism? At a minimum, this is surely doubtful for a lengthy transition period. It presupposes that forgetting will

be quick and easy and that the passions aroused have been shallow rather than deep, and ephemeral rather than enduring.

### CALMING NATIONALIST PASSIONS

On the other hand, if the sovereigntists eschew appeals that are directed primarily at the francophone majority, is it possible to mobilize a heterogeneous majority, drawing reasonable support from nearly all communities around the pro-

ject of creating a superior civil society to the one outside Quebec? This is extremely unlikely. A proposal to leave the coast-to-coast civil society of Canada to gain independence for the civil society of Quebec provides no sustenance for nationalist passion. The attempt to stimulate the latter by injecting social democracy and the defence of the welfare state into a "distinct-society" justification for sovereignty, as in the recent referendum, is to obliterate the

distinction between a referendum to create a new country and destroy an old one, and an election. Are there to be no more elections in an independent Quebec?

To govern is to choose. The necessary resort to nationalism as the means to independence occasions even more difficult choices. ❁

*Alan Cairns is a professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto.*