

# YOU ASKED FOR IT

BY DANIEL LATOUCHE

The referendum is barely a month old and already the number of half-truths, clichés, misgivings, and aphorisms has reached unprecedented levels. It will probably take years to do away with them. Better we start early.

## BLOWING SMOKE

### *First and foremost*

Quebeckers and Canadians alike seem to have forgotten that sovereignty lost and that the constitutional status quo won. True, the sovereigntists came close — and it was worth it for a while, watching the face of Peter Mansbridge, but there is no escape from the fact: the proposal to turn Quebec into a sovereign country within a new political and economic partnership with the rest of Canada lost — once more. True, Quebeckers might change their minds in two months, or in five years, but for the moment they have said “no” to the package presented to them.

In the short-run, this means that the Quebec government has no mandate to change anything in the political structure of the country and should in no way object to the abrupt move to the right that Chrétien, Klein, and Harris want to impose on Canadians. Let them and the federalists who have rallied to their cause have their country and eat it, too.

### *Second*

In no way should the referendum be interpreted as a mandate for constitutional change. The referendum question was about sovereignty and a new political partnership. It said nothing about any reconstruction of the federal format. If a

package of constitutional reforms is ever agreed on, it should be presented at another referendum. It will then be judged on its merit, and if Quebeckers once more reject it, nothing prevents them from holding another referendum on sovereignty. Democracy is an ongoing process.

## CANADA'S LOVE-IN AND OTHER NATURAL FEELINGS

### *Third*

It is simply not true that Quebeckers can be tricked into voting for sovereignty only under the most dramatic of circumstances. Support for sovereignty has nothing to do with some poor guy trampling the Quebec flag in Regina. Quebeckers can, indeed, support sovereignty under the most “ordinary” of circumstances. For many of them, sovereignty is like breathing. You either do it naturally, or you don't and then you die.

### *Fourth*

Support for sovereignty has nothing to do with either a lack of affection or a lack of interest in the rest of Canada. Surveys indicate that the great Friday love-in had no impact on the final decision. Some even suggest that it contributed to a better showing of the Yes side. In fact, French Quebeckers, federalists and sovereigntists alike, have shown remarkable indifference to what Canadians think or feel with regard to Quebec.

### *Fifth*

Canada seems to have lost all of its appeal to Quebeckers except, of course, as an economic insurance policy. More than

three-quarters of those who voted “no” confirmed that their vote was guided principally by fear of economic retaliation and by a lack of confidence in Quebec's ability to go it alone.

### *Sixth*

The belief of many Quebeckers that some English-Canadians, especially among intellectual and progressive circles, would be sympathetic to the sovereignty option, has met its defi-

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nite Waterloo. In fact, the situation has somewhat worsened since 1980. The best that can be expected is an offer to officially recognize the democratic validity of a referendum. The lessons for the next time around, or for any offer of constitutional change, have not been lost on Quebec.

## WALKING TALL: THE POLITICS OF ASSERTION

### *Seventh*

The idea that 20 or 30 of the 49 percent who voted “yes” are soft separatists who can be turned around with a few symbolic gestures is probably true. In fact, all those who voted “yes” can one day change their mind.

There is no such thing as a fundamentalist separatist. Sovereignty is a transitional political situation. Hopefully, one day, it will have disappeared from the political landscape. But it may not be correct to believe that soft support for sovereignty can be turned around by equivalent soft measures of political and constitutional accommodation. In fact, it is precisely those soft separatists who expect the most from Ottawa and the rest of Canada.

### *Eighth*

Although Lucien Bouchard played a decisive role in the Yes campaign, his appeal had nothing to do with any tribalistic messianism. His success had to do with what Quebeckers consider the ultimate rationality of any political decision, that of their *raison d'être* as a people.

### *Ninth*

The era of the French-Canadian Lieutenant, or of the favourite son à-la-Trudeau seems to be over. Clearly, Quebeckers and Canadians no longer see eye to eye about the role of the federal prime minister and who can best fulfill this role.

Does this mean that federalism cannot be reconstructed in such a way as to satisfy a majority of Quebeckers? Of course not. Constitutions can always be amended and rebuilt. Very ordinary countries do it all the time.

Reconfederation is not only possible, it is eminently feasible. But first, you should check your dictionary for the word “people.”

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