

# THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM: A VIEW FROM THE WEST

BY F.L. MORTON

On the evening of the referendum, the University of Calgary's Department of Political Science held a large student-alumni forum to observe and discuss the outcome of the Quebec vote. Attendance was more than 200 (by the far the largest turnout we have ever had for such a function), and there was a noticeable collective sigh of relief when TV screens showed the No side finally creeping past the Yes side. Most of us went home happy, filled with pizza and thinking that, the separatists having been defeated yet again, the country could — and should — now refocus its attention on other pressing economic issues.

What a surprise when we awoke the next morning to be told by all three newspapers that the No victory meant a mandate for constitutional change. Constitutional change? Who had won? Toronto's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, summed up the view from central Canada: "Firm rejection of the status quo is only clear result."

For many in the West, there is a distinct feeling of déjà vu to all this. Ottawa can no longer unilaterally negotiate with Quebec while ignoring opinion in the rest of Canada (ROC). The Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords show that this is a formula for constitutional fiasco. This problem was aggravated in the Quebec referendum because there was no meaningful mode of participation of non-Quebeckers. Indeed, the official message from the Prime Minister's Office to the ROC was to stay out of Quebec, at least until the desperate last

week. Canadians outside Quebec were reduced to "official observer" status. For the pious, there was the option of prayer. The candlelight vigils held in Calgary and other cities were touching displays of patriotism and goodwill, but also somewhat pathetic.

## NO DEALS ON SPECIAL STATUS

Goodwill is not the same as constitutional concessions. When the prime minister — himself a Quebecker — began his last-minute promises of constitutional change for Quebec, the seeds of the current dilemma were sown. Although many Westerners would be willing to accommodate Quebec by continuing the devolution of powers to the provinces, they will balk at "special status" demands such as the "distinct society" clause and a constitutional veto for Quebec. Opinions on these issues may be soft now, but could and would be whipped up by Western nationalists such as the Reform Party. On the issue of the ROC's public demonstrations of affection for Quebec, Bouchard was right: "Where were they when we needed them?" (i.e., for Meech Lake).

This is not to say that those who participated in the public rallies were not sincere about Canadian unity and "keeping Quebec." Even in Calgary, almost everyone's preferred outcome was a decisive 60-40 No victory. But — and here is the catch — the second choice for many was a 60-40 Yes victory. That is, for many — perhaps a majority in the West — the strongest desire is for closure on the Quebec/national unity is-

sue. There is a widespread resentment that the "Quebec question" has distracted us from more pressing issues of restoring fiscal balance, improving our international competitiveness, and creating jobs.

Most of my contemporaries have spent their entire adult lives — now almost 30 years — watching a series of Quebec-based prime ministers preoccupied with satisfying Quebec. Much of this attempt at appeasement consisted of lavish

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deficit spending, not to mention significant transfers of wealth from the West to Quebec. So after 30 years, what do the Quebec federalists have to show for their efforts (and our money)? That 60 percent of the québécois now support sovereignty — an all-time high! This hardly inspires confidence in launching yet another round of "national unity" initiatives. Western resentment is nourished by the fear that Trudeau, Mulroney, and now Chrétien have mortgaged the future of our children by trying to appease the unappeasable ambitions of Quebec sovereigntist demagogues. For this segment of Western Canadians, last month's 50-50 stalemate represents the worst of all possible outcomes.

## CHRÉTIEN'S DILEMMA

This, then, is the shape of Canada's new dilemma: Quebec's new minimum is beyond the ROC's maximum. Buoyed by their highest-ever vote total, Quebec nationalists will no longer be satisfied by the equivalent of a new Meech Lake Accord. But the expectations for change within Quebec are not matched by the ROC. While Chrétien is busy trying to sell constitutional changes to the ROC by blurring their meaning, Bouchard has already indicated that Ottawa's proposal for a distinct society clause is now "boring." The Chrétien government is, thus, on the horns of a dilemma. Its offer to Quebec is more that the West is willing to concede, but still not enough to satisfy Quebec nationalists. Any move to placate one will only antagonize the other. This, it should be noted, is the same dilemma that crushed not just Brian Mulroney, but the entire Conservative Party after the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord in 1992.

As if this scenario is not bad enough, it is aggravated by non-constitutional issues. Once again, Ottawa's budget deficit reduction plan is jeopardized by the threat of Quebec separatism. The Liberals have already delayed announcing new cuts in social programs and provincial transfers until after the referendum. This was pointed out repeatedly by Bouchard during the campaign as yet another reason to vote "yes": Why stay in Canada if Ottawa is broke? If the Liberals bring them down now, it will only vindicate the Parti québécois/Bloc québécois charges. But if the government further delays them, they will miss their deficit reduction target and the rest of us will have the privilege of paying higher interest rates or using a still weaker dollar — hardly policies

that endear Mr. Bouchard and his crusaders to the rest of Canada. Summed up, the prospects for political paralysis have never been greater.

### CULTURE FOR TRANSFERS

There is one ray of hope in this otherwise dark scenario: to swap culture for fiscal transfers. That is to cut Quebec loose — let it be as “distinct” as it wants with respect to culture, language, and the Charter — but, in return, force dramatic cuts in regional transfers, both the explicit ones (such as equalization and regional development) and the hidden transfers (especially unemployment insurance). The Reform Party seems to have something like this in mind already and, if embraced by the Liberals, it could probably be sold in the ROC. In the West, there has never been any great affection for the Westmount plutocracy. Nor is there any reason to suspect that a Quebec government “unrestrained by the Charter” will suddenly start treating them as second-class citizens. Quebec anglophones can take care of themselves without the constant intervention of Ottawa via the Supreme Court.

Could a “culture-for-transfers” swap be sold to Quebec? Are the québécois patriots ready to give up their subsidies for cultural autonomy, their “pogey” for their purity? Is the issue really language and not money?

### THE OLD AND NEW CANADAS

For Canada to avoid the abyss will require no small degree of statesmanship. What are our prospects? Applauded for sustaining a strict moratorium on the Constitution during his first two years in office, Chrétien has now had his “road-to-Damascus” conversion, the price of which has yet to be calculated. Overconfident, Chrétien and his advisers misjudged and

then panicked. Their credibility has been severely damaged — within Quebec and without.

It is doubtful that Canada can be saved by statesmanship alone. The schism is more than just a matter of shuffling some constitutional powers to decentralizing administrative jurisdictions. It is a struggle between an old and a new Canada — an old Canada that refuses to die, and a new Canada that refuses to be suppressed any longer. The old Canada really was the Canada of “two founding nations,” centred on the St. Lawrence, in which the English and French “races” were paramount, and Quebec was one of the two principal pillars.

But Canada, like most immigrant nations, has changed. Demographically, economically, culturally, linguistically, and politically — today’s Canada is vastly different from that of our grandparents. Population and wealth have moved West, first to Toronto, and more recently to Alberta and British Columbia. This population is much more diverse — racially, culturally, and linguistically — than the old Canada. Political power has followed wealth. On each of these fronts, Quebec’s relative status has declined and will continue to shrink.

The new Canada is not hostile toward French-Canadians (in the way the Ontario Orangemen were), but rather indifferent. This indifference, however, is fatal for Quebec’s claims to special status. In the multicultural West, there is nothing special about being ethnic. Diversity is respected but relegated to the private sphere. Every group’s self-interest in civil and political equality dictates that ethnicity and race not be enshrined in law. Ironically, the Quebec nationalists are correct when they point to 1982 as a turning point in Canadian history. The *Constitution Act, 1982*

gave legal and symbolic expression, as it were, to the new, emerging Canada while marking the relative decline of Quebec. For nations, as for individuals, there is no going back.

### THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

What price unity? The answer depends on where you sit — in the old Canada or the new Canada. For those who think, like the prime minister, that “Canada without Quebec is unthinkable,” the price they are willing to pay will be high. Indeed,

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monstrosities like the Charlottetown Accord suggest that for Quebec politicians (and civil servants) who have spent their careers in Ottawa, no price would be too high. Similar thoughts are expressed by the Canadian literati whose being Canadian (and, thus, not American!) requires Quebec.

The Canada that the professors want to save is the old Canada. For them, as for Mr. Chrétien, Canada without Quebec is unthinkable. I respect this view, but think that those who hold it are fast becoming a minority in the new Canada. For many in the new Canada, it is not un-

thinkable. For Westerners, immigrants, and younger Canadians, who have grown up in an environment where Quebec is in many ways more “foreign” than the United States, or even Asia, the Quebec card has much less emotional purchase. What price are they willing to pay to “keep Quebec”? Many Westerners think they have already paid too much and all they have received in return is a demand for still more. Suffice it to say that the bid price for national unity continues to drop the further west you go from the Manitoba-Ontario border.

The suggestion that the ROC has anything to “prove” to “dissatisfied Quebeckers” plays poorly in the West. It has the hauntingly familiar ring of Trudeau’s old promise of “renewed federalism.” As David Bercuson and Barry Cooper have pointed out, this is a “back-to-the-future” scenario. As for the outcome this time, Canada is not the same country in 1996 that it was in 1976. By my lights, what has proven difficult over the past 20 years will prove impossible in the next 20. ❁

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