

SUSTAINING CANADA

BY DAVID V.J. BELL

The departure of Quebec from confederation seems inevitable unless a successful project to revitalize Canada is achieved. If it proves nothing else, the 49.6 percent "yes" vote makes clear that loyalty to the existing Canadian state is tenuous and decreasing. Support for the current prime minister, and his vision of Canada and of Quebec, is extremely limited. Many pollsters believe that the slim No victory was achieved only because of Jean Chrétien's vague promise to "change" the status quo.

But what sort of change might win the day? Many sovereigntists have already rejected the "distinct society" solution, especially if it merely takes the form of resolutions passed in Parliament or provincial legislatures. Efforts to recreate Meech Lake or Charlottetown may be dismissed as attempts to put stale wine in different bottles. If Meech Lake had been approved, it might have secured the federalist cause for some years and taken away the possibility — perhaps even the need — for a referendum on sovereignty in this century. Attempts to turn the clock back and revive the Meech formula now seem hopelessly anachronistic. Indeed, any effort to capture Quebec's allegiance on the basis of reform of the federal-provincial "bargain" strikes me as backward-looking 19th-century thinking.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In less than five years, we enter a new century and a new millennium. All of humankind faces challenges that will threaten our continued survival as a species. These challenges cannot be met by shuffling legislative

powers from one level of government to the other, or by inscribing words in the Constitution about distinctiveness.

These challenges arise from the complex interaction between society, the economy, and the natural environment. We are suffering from a social lifestyle disease that will eventually destroy us, because it is destroying the ecosystem that sustains humankind. To survive beyond the next century we must fundamentally change our culture, social structures, and institutions of governance. The search for sustainable patterns of living is the stuff of 21st-century politics. It forces us to look ahead and develop creative responses, rather than look back in either nostalgia or anger to old injustices and failed responses. It is the essence of political leadership and vision for the future.

The subject of sustainability has been notably absent from recent political debate, and we ignore this challenge at our profound peril. Imaginative exploration of these issues is taking place at the local level in every part of Canada, most noticeably perhaps in British Columbia, where over 300 high-energy people came together last month for a conference entitled "Sustainability: It's Time for Action." The building of a new Canada committed to sustainability is too important a task to be left to politicians. Few current leaders seem even dimly aware of the challenge. Opportunities for widespread participation by non-politicians must be part of the process — indeed, the politics of sustainability require reimagining governance and replacing top-heavy bureaucratic structures

with new forms of participatory arrangements and democratic administration.

A NEW QUEBEC-CANADA UNION

This enterprise might form the basis of a new union between Quebecers and people from the rest of Canada. It may be Canada's best hope for survival. But how might this kind of renewal of Canada be achieved? The barriers are obvious. Current political elites have focused (some might say fixated)

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their attention on other matters. For Chrétien, first on his agenda is avoiding serious constitutional change. The promise he made with dark reluctance in the final days of the referendum campaign contradicted personal policies and predilections that go back over 30 years to his maiden speech in the House of Commons, when he declared that separatism was a weak force that neither required nor deserved a serious response. Bouchard has embraced a single-minded commitment to sovereignty, and insists that he will not even participate in discussions about changing the status quo to rehabilitate Canadian federalism. Preston Manning has outlined a series of changes that can be achieved without constitutional amendment and that diminish the role of government overall while devolving certain powers to the provinces. The premiers for now are very reluctant to countenance any serious discussion of constitutional reform

that accords special treatment to Quebec, though most would welcome further decentralization of federal powers to the provinces. They seem profoundly unimpressed by Trudeau's warning, echoed by Chrétien, that further weakening of the federal government might undermine the edifice of national power to the point of collapse.

No leader has projected a vision of a vital new Canada that includes Quebec and that embraces ideals and commitments that can rejuvenate patriotism of all Canadians. No leader seems able to tap into the energy and enthusiasm so evident among those who participated in the Montreal rally. No sovereigntist leader will (officially, at least) consider innovative proposals that might capture the imagination of the Quebec people and persuade them to stay within a revitalized Canada — not because of what it has been, but in anticipation of what it can become.

THE PROMISE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Yet the roots of renewal are deep in the soil of recent Canadian history. Canada played a leadership role at the Earth Summit. The federal minister of the environment who attended the Rio meetings and greatly impressed environmentalists from Canada and elsewhere was Jean Charest. He had succeeded the most high-profile environment minister ever appointed, under whose direction the federal green plan was introduced: Lucien Bouchard. Canadians had earlier pioneered in responding to the Brundtland commission by establishing round tables on environment and economy at the federal level, in each province, and in many local settings. Members of the general public throughout Canada have had their environmental consciousness raised by both local disasters, global cataclysms, and constant educational efforts.

There is an untapped reservoir of public support for imaginative leadership in applied sustainability. But how to mobilize it?

DON'T WAIT FOR THE POLITICIANS TO ACT

We cannot wait for the politicians. NGOs, educators, enlightened business leaders, representatives of First Nations, and others who understand the urgency of transforming our structures, culture, and lifestyle to meet the challenge of sustainability must come together across barriers of jurisdiction and ideology to forge this new vision. We must find a way of reaching out to the majority in Quebec (and elsewhere in Canada) who would prefer a renewed, revitalized Canada to the risks and uncertainties of secession and sovereignty. This is not an easy task, but we can adapt for the purpose the methodology of participatory "search conferences" that has been used so successfully in both the private and public sectors. A country-wide consultation could be sponsored and coordinated by a coalition of NGOs in partnership with universities and sympathetic foundations and corporations. It would aim to develop a vision and statement of core values that will help define a future course for Canada.

No one knows whether it is possible to put this country back together again. I believe it will require a very different kind of glue from what current leaders are offering. We must go beyond the mechanics of federal-provincial relations to inspire the soul and sensibility of the new millennium. ♦

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NOW WHAT? REFLECTIONS ON CANADA AFTER THE REFERENDUM

BY DAVID CAMERON

The vexed issue of Quebec as a distinct society, which surfaced as an issue in the latter half of the referendum campaign, is now haunting the post-referendum scene.

Unquestionably, this expression speaks to a structural reality of Canadian life — the duality that has existed as long as Canadians have inhabited the top half of North America. The equal partnership of the two founding peoples, special status, the two-nations theory, distinct society, and even asymmetrical federalism — all have been attempts to express and accommodate the fact of duality in a way that is satisfactory to both halves of the whole, to both French-speaking and English-speaking peoples.

SPECIAL STATUS: A CANADIAN ICON

But consider this. Each of these has failed to find a permanent home in the iconography of Canada, and all have been discarded. The exception is the distinct society, which appears to retain its currency. It is, however, my suspicion that it is close to being thrown on the scrap heap of history, and for the traditional Canadian reason: it is becoming obsolete in Quebec before the rest of the country has found the strength to accept it. The phrase is tainted goods, carrying memories of Meech and Charlottetown.

Yet Ottawa, as a result of its referendum "promises," feels itself condemned to push for the recognition — probably the constitutional recognition — of Quebec as a distinct society.

Before doing this, three questions need to be answered.

WILL THE MODERATE NATIONALISTS BUY IN?

1. Is it what Quebecers, especially moderate nationalists, want and is it all they want?

Consider when and how the issue of the distinct society came up. It was used in the ref-

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erendum campaign as a useful stock to beat the federalists with. It symbolized the rest of the country's refusal to recognize Quebec for what it is and it was a short-hand reference to the failed Meech Lake Accord. When the No side began to panic, Chrétien started to talk about his acceptance of Quebec as a distinct society. By the end of the campaign, delivering change and especially making good on the distinct society commitment had become "a promise" of the No side to which Canada would be held.

But is it clear what the people of Quebec want at this point?

The sovereigntist leaders imply that this is what the people of Quebec want, but their motives are hardly pure. Interestingly, on referendum night, Claude Ryan began speaking about "le peuple de Québec." The first hint of a new way of defining duality, perhaps?

2. Can you bring it off successfully?

What did Meech Lake and Charlottetown teach us? One thing for sure: Do not start down the constitutional path if you are not confident that you can reach the destination successfully. Each time we try and fail, we weaken ourselves. The prime minister does not know whether he has all the necessary provincial ducks in a row for his specific proposal. He needs six provinces, including Ontario, to push a constitutional amendment into the face of the PQ for approval. British Columbia, probably even with a new premier, will not be cooperative and it is by no means clear how Alberta would line up. Newfoundland is run by Clyde Wells, who made one of his usual helpful interventions on this very subject in the course of the campaign. Ontario is not speaking clearly on this subject yet. Preston Manning, for his part, will oppose it.

The politics are still very tricky on this one. They need to be turned from tricky into predictable before the plunge into this swamp.

THE DISTINCT SOCIETY TRAP

3. If you can bring it off successfully, can you ensure that Quebecers will accept it as a meaningful gesture?

We have a lot of painful evidence that the sovereigntists are far more able to structure historical myth and memory

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