

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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and to shape opinion in Quebec and the prospect of Lucien Bouchard assuming the premiership of Quebec City. There is little reason to believe this has changed.

Having laid the distinct society trap, the sovereigntists will watch it spring with delight. They will say that recognition of Quebec as a distinct society is a completely inadequate response to a referendum in which sovereignty almost won. It is one-fifth of Meech Lake. Robert Bourassa insisted on and almost got five minimal conditions in Meech Lake, just one of which was the distinct society provision, and he is a federalist, for goodness sake. It is insulting to offer this paltry gesture after all we have gone through.

In this competition for the good opinion of Quebecers, who will win? If the gesture is spurned, how will those political leaders and citizens in English-speaking Canada feel who spent time and political capital in getting the measure approved?

What, then, should Ottawa do? I think it is still too early to select a shiny set of constitutional proposals and try to get people to buy them. Some work needs to be done first.

REGAINING THE INITIATIVE

Take stock of the situation. Let the dust settle a bit so you can be sure you understand the situation with which you are dealing.

Although Lucien Bouchard's personal plans are now clear, it would be unwise to assume that his full strategy is settled and known. The view of provincial premiers on Quebec, on decentralization and on the role of the government of Canada, will be crucial in determining Ottawa's freedom of manoeuvre. Public opinion in Quebec is likely to be developing rapidly. Is it demobilizing and shifting back to its earlier default posi-

tion (no real interest in constitutional/unity issues), or have the referendum results and Bouchard's decision to come to Quebec City kept the discontent and desire for change alive? What is the state of opinion in English-speaking Canada? In the absence of coherent national leadership, one suspects that it will revert more or less to the status quo, despite the shock that English-speaking Canadians received.

Stop reacting to the separatists. Look for ways to take the initiative.

The separatists have been effective at setting the agenda and establishing the timetable for debate about the national question. They are about to do so again. The federal government should be searching for ways in which the initiative can be seized from Lucien Bouchard and the PQ. At the moment, we seem to be stuck in mental grooves that block innovation. We need new ideas. Like it or not, sovereignty is a simple, positive idea. Which positive idea will we set against it?

Reach beyond the separatist leadership and provincial premiers to the people. Bring the people into the choice making. It is their country after all.

Why do we always leave consultation with the people of Quebec to the separatists? Why not look to involve moderate nationalists in deep, open discussion with federalists and with the government of Canada? Ottawa should take the lead in helping other Canadians come to terms with the necessity of change and in working through the changes with them. We know that premiers want decentralization, but do Canadians?

THE FUTURE OF CHRÉTIEN

Set partisanship aside wherever possible.

Respect, involve, and use Daniel Johnson and the Quebec Liberals. Their constitu-

tional platform should be developed in the closest collaboration with Ottawa and provincial premiers. Respect, involve and use Jean Charest, one of federalism's best resources. Who cares if it helps him rebuild the Conservative Party? In narrow partisan terms, a weak to non-existent Tory party suits the federal Liberals very well, but if the country survives, it is going to need something other than the Bloc and Reform. Link up with significant elements of Quebec society. Seek their help and listen to what they have to say.

Finally, give meaning to the referendum outcome. Help shape Canadians' understanding of what happened on October 30 and what the consequences are likely to be.

We need some leadership from the government of Canada. Prime Minister Chrétien needs to decide for himself what happened on referendum night and to speak frankly and forcefully to the Canadian people about it. It is a notable lack of leadership that he has not done so and shows no signs of doing so. If he does not help us sort through this, will it be surprising if Canadians go back to sleep, even after the shock therapy they have just received?

Chrétien has been damaged by the referendum. He, and we, got it all wrong. He needs to re-establish his claim to leadership by showing that he has learned from the experience and that he has a plausible approach that he and the country can follow. Honest, truthful talk is badly needed.

We have got ourselves into a terrible mess and finding the path out of it will be difficult. If Ottawa tries to offer "goodies" to Quebec, the approach will be rejected in English-speaking Canada and denigrated by the sovereigntists in Quebec. If Ottawa reverts to business as usual — jobs and

the economy — Canadians will do likewise and the country will be no better prepared when the national unity crisis resumes.

THE NEED FOR BIG-PICTURE POLITICS

Doing anything else poses a dreadful challenge. Yet something else seems to be needed. I have a hunch that we need to change the terms of the debate. We need, all of us in Quebec and elsewhere, to rediscover the reasons for political union, or discover sadly that those reasons no longer exist.

At the founding of our country more than 100 years ago, the Fathers of Confederation knew that there were military, economic, political, and cultural reasons to unite, and they found the strength to make the historic compromises necessary to bring a new country into existence. We have now had 30 years of destructive conflict and travail. Are we, as a national community, up to the act of political creation that will be necessary to turn these years of conflict to our common benefit and mutual advantage?

That, I cannot help thinking, is the question that we and our political leaders are facing today. It is, however, difficult to conceive of a challenge of greater magnitude. It calls for statesmanship of a high order, a willingness to abandon old categories of debate and entrenched policies and programs that no longer serve the public's needs, and an openness of spirit that has not been much in evidence in Canadians in recent years. ♦

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