

CRUNCH TIME: THE "NO" FACTOR

BY DANIEL DRACHE

The unthinkable may come to pass. The 1995 Quebec referendum is not likely to be a re-run of the 1980 referendum when the federalists trumped the nationalists. What is different is the remarkable shift in public opinion in both Quebec and in Canada. The latest public opinion polls reveal two striking developments. Unlike in 1980, the most recent polls reveal that a majority of English Canadians now openly entertain the possibility of Quebec not being part of Canada in the near future. Almost 50 percent of those interviewed favoured having a new relationship with Quebec after a "yes" vote. English Canadians do not like the idea of a "yes" vote, but they will accept the democratic will of Quebecers.

In Quebec, polls reveal that there is no constitutional fatigue about holding a second referendum as many experts predicted. Instead, a majority of Quebecers believe that the referendum is an essential step toward renewing their relations with Canada. They see it as the defining moment that will end Canada's constitutional crisis one way or another, regardless of the wording of the referendum question.

A TURNING POINT

A "no" vote will send the unambiguous message to Ottawa that Quebec is a province like the others with no special status, no veto, no constitutional recognition of its particularity and identity. It will have to do the best it can under the existing framework, striking deals with Ottawa or with Canada's 10 other governments. Johnson can ask for a new constitutional

deal for Quebec; few believe that he can make good on his promise.

A "yes" vote will send an equally powerful message that Quebec wants a new relationship, based on special status, between Canada and itself as equals—a post-independence partnership that entails new kinds of power-sharing arrangements yet to be negotiated. The incentive to share power comes from the fact that both Canada and Quebec have a stake in seeing that the process succeeds; with high levels of economic integration in place, policy coordination is more attractive than non-cooperation.

It could also be the first step toward building a new relationship of governance that requires extensive changes to Canada's political system. Federal spending in areas of Quebec's exclusive jurisdiction would have to end and, in other areas, would have to be rethought. Quebec will insist on having a status commensurate with its responsibilities for developing its culture, language, economy, and nationality from a position of sovereignty.

Canada's political elites see little positive in holding the referendum, let alone negotiating a new relationship with Quebec. Rather, they continue to peddle their apocalyptic vision that a "yes" vote is a vote for chaos, disorder, and insecurity. Its premise is that Canada can pretend that Quebec does not exist. This would amount to a retreat into autarky or economic self-sufficiency. There would be minimal cooperation and coordination between governments, but no

new relationship. This beggarly-neighbour policy is the worst-case scenario; it makes for bad economics and, even worse, it makes no long-term political sense.

THE VOLATILITY OF PUBLIC OPINION

What the pollsters cannot predict with certainty is whether the Yes camp has the momentum to win the referendum campaign on October 30. With the Yes and No forces so close in popular support, nothing can be taken for granted. Voters change their minds once or even twice before voting day. This is what happened in the recent Ontario election when support for the front-running party collapsed. Canadians outside of Quebec should not underestimate the Yes side this time around for four important reasons.

First, the Liberal party is no longer the force it once was, federally and provincially, in Quebec. With Trudeau off the scene, where is the charismatic federal leader equal to Bouchard, Parizeau, and Dumont? Every poll shows that Daniel Johnson is the least credible politician in Quebec today. Lucienne Robillard, the federalist minister, is only slightly ahead of Johnson in the polls, just ahead of the prime minister at 39 percent. All the leaders of the No camp are far behind Bouchard, Parizeau, and Dumont in leadership credibility. Leadership is going to count even more this time.

Second, with the failure of Meech Lake and Charlottetown reform initiatives, the sovereigntists have an advantage this time that did not exist previously. Sixty percent of Quebecers want new constitutional proposals and reject the status quo as unsatisfactory. Only the Yes camp has shown itself to be flexible. Parizeau's concept of sovereignty has evolved; Chrétien's brand of

federalism has not. In an era where flexibility is the buzz word for moderation and compromise, the Yes camp has a net advantage going into the referendum.

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Third, NAFTA and the Martin-Axworthy review of government spending and social policy has effectively redrawn the map of Canadian federalism. Chrétien has not waited for the referendum vote before massively restructuring the economic foundations of Canadian federalism. Already, the Canadian social welfare programs that directly affect the well being of Canadians and Quebecers are being decentralized to make them dependent on the market and the individual's ability to pay. Canada's social security system used to be based on providing social assistance, regardless of the cause of that need. Now, eligibility rules are to be left to the discretionary judgment of provincial governments to decide who is deserving and who can be eliminated from welfare rolls. In an era of competitive deregulation, provincial autonomy has less significance and substance than ever. In encouraging a downward spiral in social policy, Ottawa has effectively rewritten the rules of government without any need of a referendum.

THE NEW RULES OF THE GAME

The No camp is going to be on the hook for dismantling Cana-

da's national programs. With Ottawa spending less money than ever on social policy, health care, and education, Quebecers have less than ever at stake in being part of Canada. The glue that once kept the country together no longer does.

Under the new rules of the game, Quebec has little hope of influencing Ottawa to adopt its priorities, other than those that are narrowly economic. So, what is clear to many Quebecers is that the constitutional status quo is not evolving in the way Daniel Johnson asserts. Instead, Canada's state system is being transformed against Quebec's social and cultural interests in the short run and likely to remain so. This is Bouchard's most effective economic argument in a province crippled by high unemployment, a declining industrial sector and grinding poverty. Quebec gets transfer payments, but the jobs and research funds go to Ontario.

Finally, any government that expects to win a referendum has to build a broad coalition capable of obtaining a majority. In rejecting unilateral secession from Canada without some form of political and economic ties, the sovereigntists have accomplished what few thought possible. Parizeau has been catapulted into Quebec's political centre. This is the real importance of the June 12 agreement with Bouchard and Dumont. Their agreement creates a highly innovative institutional framework to win over the undecided voter. It worked to defeat Charlottetown; it could be the winning strategy in 1995 and it makes the Yes team a far tougher adversary this time around.

THE STRATEGIC VOTER

There are other dimensions to the 1995 referendum that no pollster is able to answer. No poll can predict whether the so-

called average Quebec voter will vote strategically on October 30. Quebecers have always used the ballot to advance Quebec's interest in a system where it is always a minority—one province out of 10. Quebecers have found the most effective way to maximize their bargaining leverage with Ottawa: vote massively for the Liberal party and use that position as a power base. This is why Quebec has had the muscle to win concessions from Ottawa every time the Liberals formed the government party. Quebecers voted strategically for Mulroney in 1984 and again in the 1988 Free Trade Election.

In the coming referendum, if a lot of Quebecers see the value in strategic voting, nothing can be taken for granted. Quebecers will weigh not only the pros and cons of a "no" vote versus a "yes" vote, but will follow their past instincts. They will have to decide whether the referendum can be used as a means to a larger end. This is the soft side to the hard question that Quebecers face on October 30.

Quebecers want a new relationship with Canada post-patriation of the Constitution, post-Meech, post-Charlottetown, and post-NAFTA. Constitutional negotiations have hit the wall and every Quebecer understands that English Canada will make no more concessions unless its feet are held to the fire. If the referendum is interpreted as an exercise in strategic voting, it will turn out to be a different kind of exercise than current federalist strategy anticipates. For the undecided Quebecer who does not want to make an irrevocable choice on October 30 Parizeau's pitch to the centre is the best bet. ♦

Daniel Drache is director of the Roberts Centre for Canadian Studies and professor of political economy at York University.

ONTARIO'S "COMMON SENSE REVOLUTION" AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

BY A. BRIAN TANGUAY

On June 8, Mike Harris confounded his many doubters by leading the Progressive Conservatives to a convincing victory in the Ontario election, taking 82 seats with 45 percent of the popular vote. Drawing their political inspiration from Newt Gingrich, Ralph Klein, and Preston Manning, the provincial Tories promised to usher in a "common sense revolution" that would neutralize the special interests they claim have held previous governments in thrall, would slash state spending, would trim the fat (and much of the underlying muscle) from a bloated bureaucracy and would relieve some of the fiscal burden on Ontario's harried middle class.

The centrepiece of this proposed revolution was a northern version of Ronald Reagan's voodoo economics: a 20 percent reduction in government spending combined with a 30 percent tax cut—along with a promise to balance the budget in four years (later amended to read "within our first mandate"). Additional elements of the Tory platform, such as the elimination of employment equity, boot camps for young offenders and workfare for those lazy welfare recipients, were consciously designed to appeal to a broad swath of angry, suburban middle-class voters who had seen their real incomes decline dramatically since the late 1980s and wanted to find some convenient scapegoats.

LOW-BALLING THE REFERENDUM

Despite the looming referendum on Quebec's future, constitutional matters mattered hardly at all in the election

campaign. Mike Harris has never shown much interest in these larger national issues; as if to underscore the low priority that he assigns to the Quebec question, he gave the inter-governmental affairs portfolio to Dianne Cunningham, whom he had defeated in the leadership race in 1990. Cunningham has been virtually invisible since her elevation to cabinet, while Harris himself, at venues such as this past summer's First Ministers' conference, has been uncharacteristically guarded in his comments on the impending vote on Quebec's future.

Does the Ontario election result make any difference to the country's constitutional riddle? The most obvious change is in the style of leadership that Harris brings to the national stage. Ontarians are accustomed to seeing their political leaders play an active and visible role in constitutional negotiations. Frequently, this role has transcended the bounds of narrow partisan politics. Bill Davis allied himself with Pierre Trudeau, for instance, and both David Peterson and Bob Rae worked with Brian Mulroney in an attempt to bring about constitutional change. Moreover, Peterson and Rae were both willing to sacrifice some of Ontario's clout, in terms of its weight in the Senate, for example, in an effort to bring Quebec into the constitutional fold.

Mike Harris, it is safe to say, will never find himself in the role of constitutional linchpin. A small town, "aw shucks" kind of politician, Harris perfectly reflects Ontario's growing self-

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