

# A WESTERN PERSPECTIVE ON THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM

BY BARRY COOPER

Westerners are interested in three aspects of the Quebec referendum campaign: the symbolic aspect; the legal and political aspect; and the aspect that concerns the interests of Quebec and how those interests relate to the interests of westerners.

The TV pictures of the premier of Quebec biting his lip and barely containing his tears during the signing of the Preamble to Bill One, the "Declaration of Sovereignty," struck many westerners as puzzling and perhaps a bit undignified. In Quebec, where the image was repeated again and again, the meaning was clearly different. Westerners who actually read the declaration would have found it to be a peculiar document as well because it tells a story that belongs to Quebec alone.

It is the familiar political myth of *la survivance*, a myth of the survival of the Quebec people against all the odds, including winter. According to this myth, Quebecers were one of two founding peoples, and the equal of the English. Regrettably, reality "did not live up to those early hopes." The federal state invaded provincial jurisdictions that put survival in peril: the Quebec people were "hoodwinked" by the *Constitution Act* of 1982, betrayed by the Meech Lake accord, and insulted by the Charlottetown accord.

Because it is so remote from their own experience of Canada, this myth is rejected out of hand by westerners. In response, they have recourse to history, though myths, including the myths circulating in

western Canada, are often impervious to historical evidence. It is not that westerners are unable to understand the Quebec story; it is simply that it is not theirs. So right from the start there is a symbolic gap—narrow perhaps, but very deep—between the ways that westerners and Quebecers understand the events that are unfolding in Quebec.

## THE BERTRAND DECISION

The political and legal issues are unclouded by this symbolic dissonance. When Quebec Superior Court Judge Robert Lesage ruled on the contention of Guy Bertrand that Quebec could not legally secede from Canada without the agreement of the other parties to the Constitution, his reasoning seemed obvious and sound. Lesage went on to point out, however, that in the absence of any legal support either from the government of Canada or from the official opposition in Quebec, he saw no reason to grant Bertrand's injunction to prevent the referendum from taking place.

Many westerners were puzzled by this as well. If secession was illegal, and the referendum was a key component of the secession process, then it made sense for the government of Canada to support Bertrand's position. Matters were not clarified when the Quebec minister of justice, Paul Bégin, announced that, in his opinion, Quebec had not recognized the *Constitution Act* of 1982 anyhow, so that the provisions of the Charter were without force and effect. The reply of the federal minister in charge of the refer-

endum, Labour Minister Lucienne Robillard, that the Lesage ruling introduced some "legal uncertainty" around the constitutionality of secession, seemed particularly weak.

In terms of political tactics, the position taken and then abjured by Daniel Johnson that another Meech Lake offer was possible, was not well thought out. Every western premier has said that no such deal is even remotely likely. Besides, it looked as if the No side was abandoning their game plan, which had been to criticize what was actually on the table, namely secession, and not to propose an alternative.

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For his part, Premier Parizeau also looked unsteady when he took the Lesage decision as the start of a crisis. He immediately called an emergency cabinet meeting, which ensured that it would, indeed, look like a crisis. He was equally imprudent when workers at MIL Davie shipyard threatened to vote "no." This perennially bankrupt operation, half as productive as the inefficient Swedes at hanging steel, was promptly given a \$60 million subsidy, which amounts to around \$600,000 a vote, assuming all 100 employees voted "yes."

## THE SOVEREIGNTY BILL

The instrument of secession, Bill One, contemplates a "partnership treaty" with Canada (ss. 3 and 4) and a second treaty (s. 25) to deal with the "equitable apportionment of assets and liabilities of the Government of Canada." Section 5 declares that the Outaouais region will be the home to the institutions created under this partnership treaty, which looks like a move to ensure that civil servants currently in the employ of the government of Canada remain at their desks. The assumption underlying the notion of a partnership treaty is questionable. Why would Canada, and the Canadian west in particular, be interested in an agreement that, among other things, retains the existing borders of Quebec (s. 10), maintains Quebec as a member of NAFTA (s. 15), and keeps UI and other welfare measures at their present elevated levels (s. 19)? Moreover, the assets and liabilities involved in s. 25 are apparently not those lodged in the province of Quebec only, but include items such as Banff Park and CFB Esquimalt. Westerners have a strong proprietary interest in such matters and it is hardly congenial to Quebec's position.

When one looks at the interests of the west in a narrow and material sense, the benefits that accrue to this part of the country from the presence of Quebec in confederation are not all that obvious. Robert Mansell, a respected economist at the University of Calgary, has provided the numbers, and they are often mentioned in the press, at least in Alberta. Mansell has calculated that between 1970 (just before the first attempt at constitutional accommodation, the Victoria Charter) to 1991, Quebec has received around \$168 billion more from Ottawa (i.e., the rest

of the country) than the federal government has collected in revenues from Quebec. In contrast, Alberta has contributed \$165 billion more than it has received. Alistair Taylor, an Emeritus Professor from Queen's University, has made similar calculations regarding the net economic benefits Quebec has received from more prosperous and more productive regions and individuals.

### IS A "NO" VOTE REALLY BETTER THAN A "YES" VOTE?

Possibly the most astonishing development, as far as westerners are concerned, was the response from the secessionists to the self-evident remarks of Premier Romanow of Saskatchewan. Quebec, he said, could not expect to keep existing trade links if it became independent—presumably by constitutional means. Accord-

ing to Lucien Bouchard, such remarks were "arrogant, threatening, and disrespectful." Romanow, he went on, was "an enemy of change in Quebec, a devoted enemy. I would say a commando."

The conclusion to which many westerners are compelled is this: if the No side wins, Canada will be in for more constitutional chaos—after all, Mr. Bouchard, like Mr. Lévesque,

has long maintained that "no" really means *à la prochaine fois*; if the Yes side wins, we can look forward to some acute, but short-term economic chaos.

Given the current state of the Canadian economy, the second option looks relatively benign. ❀

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## ONTARIO'S "COMMON SENSE REVOLUTION" *from page 7*

absorption, its preoccupation with reviving the devastated provincial economy. The referendum debate is far from the minds of most of Ontario's voters, who are more concerned with discovering where the jobs have gone and how to bring them back.

Harris can be expected to adopt a low-key attitude on the constitutional question, avoiding any inflammatory remarks that might fuel nationalist anger in Quebec, but making no promises about a renewed economic and political partnership with a sovereign Quebec, if it decides to make a break with Canada in the referendum (a result that looks increasingly unlikely). Probably, then, Harris will simply follow the cues of higher-profile colleagues—Ralph Klein, Roy Romanow, and Clyde Wells, most notably.

### A VERY MODEST ROLE FOR ONTARIO

Although there might be a temptation to contrast the Harris government's parochialism with the broader national perspective of its predecessors, it was clear from the moment that the Charlottetown accord was defeated, that Ontario's political leaders, no matter what their partisan stripe, would no longer be willing to

make major concessions to Quebec in order to try to heal the constitutional wounds opened in 1982. Bob Rae, for instance, underwent a particularly rapid metamorphosis and quickly discovered the political virtues in Quebec bashing. On more than one occasion after 1992, Rae petulantly complained that Ontario was getting shafted by the existing set of federal-provincial fiscal arrangements and that he was tired of seeing Quebec get a disproportionate share of Ottawa's transfers.

Harris will likely continue with this posture: though his

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government will be happy to collaborate with Quebec and the other provinces in decentralizing power from Ottawa, Quebec should not expect to receive any special treatment. And Harris would warn sover-

eignitist leaders like Lucien Bouchard that they ought not to delude themselves into thinking that Ontario will make any effort to reforge a new economic partnership in the wake of a successful referendum outcome.

### CONSTITUTION LOGJAM — STILL A CRISIS

So where does all of this leave us? Precisely where we have been mired since the process of constitutional reform was set in motion by the Mulroney and Bourassa governments in the mid-1980s. Some variation of Antonio Gramsci's epigrammatic remarks seems an appropriate description of Canada's current dilemma: the present crisis consists precisely of the fact that the old (constitutional) order is dying and the new cannot be born. It is patently obvious that the status quo is unacceptable to a solid majority of Québécois. At the same time, English Canadians are completely hostile to any attempt to constitutionalize political reform and thus reject out of hand any talk of amending formulae or distinct society clauses.

The sovereigntist alliance in Quebec—Parti québécois, Bloc québécois, and "Super" Mario's Parti de l'action démocra-

tique—is now committed to a referendum question that hinges on the offer of an economic and political partnership to the rest of Canada after a "yes" vote. As always, the premiers in English Canada reject outright this notion of a new European Union-style partnership and Mike Harris will not deviate from this common front despite Lucien Bouchard's desperate attempts to portray the neophyte Ontario premier as more sympathetic than any of his colleagues to the sovereigntist cause. As a result, Quebec voters are likely to see the offer of partnership for what it really is: a symbolic gesture that carries absolutely no guarantees. This could well presage a close defeat for the referendum, plunging Canada and Quebec yet again into the constitutional morass from which they have not been able to extricate themselves for the past 15 years. No one should look to the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris for any innovative ideas on how to break this constitutional logjam. ❀

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