

# A THREE-SIDED DEAL: WHO WON, WHO LOST?

by Daniel Latouche

The agreement signed in early June between Lucien Bouchard, Jacques Parizeau, and Mario Dumont is one of the most interesting pieces of political craftsmanship to have occurred in Canada in a long time. Inter-party agreements are rare in a parliamentary system and it is an even rarer case when such an agreement involves parties operating at both the federal and provincial levels.

The agreement tells us a great deal not only about how the sovereignty camp intends to conduct its fall campaign, but also about how the rest of the country perceives Quebec and how it intends to work to re-configure the country to adapt it to the new global age. In short, the Bouchard-Parizeau-Dumont agreement tells us more about Canada than it does about the "separatists." And here the omens do not look very promising.

## OMENS IN CANADA

Of course, no one was expecting any official endorsement from Ottawa or any other provincial capitals, but no one was quite prepared either for the animosity and scorn with which these rather mild and, to some extent, quasi-federalist proposals were received. Of the more than five hundred MLAs in Canada, not one has been quoted as even suggesting that such a proposal was a step in the right direction. This unanimous rejection also includes organizations and segments of the Canadian public which, in the past, have been somewhat favourable to Quebec and which include trade unions, intellectuals, French-Canadian and Acadian minorities, teachers, socialists, anti-poverty organizations, Francophile parents, university pro-

fessors, students, churches, community groups, scientists, the NDP, anti-racist organizations, women's groups, artists, and philosophers. It has been argued that this unanimity will dissipate as the date of the referendum approaches and that it will completely evaporate if the Yes side wins a significant mandate. This is undoubtedly true, but misses the point

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entirely. There is no doubt that following a Yes victory, voices will be raised in the rest of the country to suggest than accommodating Quebec is in Canada's and Ontario's best interests. Rationality and having one's back to the wall usually brings a little sanity to the public discourse.

## A LACK OF WILL

Few people in Quebec are really worried about the attitude of English-Canada the morning after a referendum victory. For obvious strategic reasons, sovereignists tend to underplay the obstacles in the path of a post-referendum agreement and few actually believe in the rose-tinted scenario of Mr. Parizeau. But what is more worrisome is the apparent lack of interest and even of political will in the rest of the country to contemplate the possibility of significant change in the constitutional fabric of the country. The apoplectic reaction

to the Bouchard-Parizeau-Dumont proposals clearly reveals that English-Canada has now lost all interest in Canada as a "work-in-progress." They seem to believe that Canadian history is over and should only be learned in school and celebrated in parades. Few will insist that the institutional framework of the country is perfect and most will agree that some reforms are, indeed, necessary and possible, but at best these are seen as marginal adjustments to a political architecture that is largely completed and that will either swim or sink on its own.

Behind the contempt and derision with which the coalition proposals were received probably lies not only a profound irritation directed against Quebec and the sovereignists for once more trying to fudge the issue of "separation," but also a certain quiet resignation at the fact that the federal union has lost much of its usefulness. There is even some soreness directed at those sovereignists who seem the only people who still believe in the importance of political institutions, constitutions, and partnerships in bringing about a better future for citizens. That it is the Quebec sovereignists and not Queen's University or the Bureau of Federal-Provincial Relations that would come up with a plan to re-confederate Canada tells us a great deal about the capacity of this country for self-renewal.

The negative reaction by the rest of the country has clearly had the effect of a cold shower on Quebecers' reaction to the "virage." With only a few positive signs com-

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ing out of the country, one could have easily expected a 15 percent jump in public support, from about the 40–45 percent mark where the pro-sovereignty forces had been stuck for the last 10 months, to something in the 55–60 percent range. The 60 percent mark has long been recognized as a realistic estimate of the upper end of the pro-sovereignty camp, one which includes those people who are likely to vote "yes" following a bandwagon effect. These 15 percentage points coincide more or less with the 25 percent of the population that believes sovereignty to be a good idea, but only if it leads to the final resolution of the Canada-Quebec conflict and to profound changes in the federal union. These are the famous "soft" nationalists who for the moment have "parked" their vote with Mario Dumont's Action démocratique.

But a cold shower, however cold, remains a shower. It brings water, and water brings life. For the sovereigntists, a 5–10 percent jump in public opinion support is better than no movement at all. As Premier Parizeau himself remarked, "In February, the experts were arguing where we stood in the 40–45 percent range; now they are arguing if we are slightly above or slightly below the 50 percent mark." It is difficult to argue with his analysis although, as he knows very well, what goes up can also come down.

One of the unexpected results of this slight movement in public opinion will be to increase the possibility of effectively having the referendum in the fall (probably November 6 or October 30). Until now, there was still a possibility that Premier Parizeau would call the entire thing off. This possibility actually increased with the signing of the tripartite deal since it would have al-

lowed the Premier to renege on his promise by pretexting the obligation to respect the advice of his "partners."

#### THE RAPPORT DE FORCE

Has the *rapport de force* changed within the sovereignty camp? Most certainly, but not necessarily in the direction predicted by commentators who have tended to interpret the signing of the "Entente pour le changement" as either a defeat for Mr. Parizeau, who had to let go of his hard-line strategy, or a surrender by Mario Dumont, who will simply be "incorporated" into the Parti québécois. This simplistic vision again misses the point and shows how unfamiliar we all are with European-like political coalitions.

The tripartite Parizeau-Bouchard-Dumont coalition is not a "Union sacrée" on the model of the Meech or Charlottetown coalitions. It is simply three double deals that have been made to converge. First, there is the obvious Bouchard-Dumont deal to force Jacques Parizeau to show some flexibility on both the content and the process of the referendum. Then there is the Parizeau-Bouchard deal to force Dumont into the open and convince him to support not only the idea of a fall referendum (to which the leader of the Action démocratique was strongly opposed), but also of participating in a sovereignty coalition. And then, there is the little-talked-about, but very important Parizeau-Dumont agreement to ensure Bouchard would not walk away with the prize and modify his claim as to the ephemeral character of the Bloc québécois and his lack of interest in the provincial scene. Both Mario Dumont and Jacques Parizeau have a vested interest in making sure Lucien Bouchard remains the most popular politician in Quebec and does not decide to become either the PQ or the AD leader following either a "no" or a "yes" vote at the

referendum. More than ever, he is now committed to staying in Ottawa or going back to the Saguenay following the fall campaign.

Who won? Who lost? Which of the three side deals is the most important? That remains to be seen. In the short run, the three leaders have each reinforced their own leadership position. With approximately 50 percent of his supporters (contrary to 10 percent in February) now saying they are willing to back the Yes side, Mario Dumont has shown that he does, indeed, have some influence on the middle-ground voters, a fact that will no doubt invite him to demand a more visible role in the sovereignty coalition. But how far can his two partners go to accommodate him without undermining their own positions? As Meech and Charlottetown showed before, coalitions rarely last long enough to enjoy the ultimate prize.

Who lost? Daniel Johnson is an obvious candidate—he is proving more and more his complete uselessness even to his own allies. But he is not alone. By remaining silent, those who still believe (but do they, indeed) that Canada is viable only as a partnership between the three nations of this land have not helped their cause: tactically perhaps, but certainly not strategically. And as someone once said, "The future lasts a very long time."

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