

FROM THE PROJET DE SOCIÉTÉ TO BROKERAGE POLITICS: FORGING A NEW COUNTRY OR WINNING THE CAMPAIGN?

by Jane Jenson

Since the unilateral announcement of *le virage* on the road to sovereignty by Bloc québécois leader Lucien Bouchard, and the Parti québécois' decision to return to a position hardly different from that of 1980, the sovereigntists' game plan has obviously been altered. One aspect about which little has been explicitly said is the strategic shift away from a model of constitution writing to one of designing a winning electoral campaign. Sovereigntists' actions are now driven much more by the goal of minimizing the chances of losing the vote than by the effort to achieve a mandate for independence centred on a definition of the character of the future country and its citizenship.

BROKERAGE POLITICS

As Lucien Bouchard made very clear during his news conference on June 21, marking the first days of the referendum campaign, he believes that victory will go to the camp that conducts "the best campaign" and he intends to do all that is necessary to strategize such a campaign. One element of the campaign involves describing institutions that no one has the power to institute. But more important is the promise that change will really bring no change. The latter is a classic strategy of brokerage politicians. Resort to this trick of the politicians' trade signals the extent to which there has been a shift.

What difference does this replacement of one model by another make? Will the mandate resulting from a focus on winning at almost any cost differ from one generated by debates about real constitutional futures? The answer is quite simply

yes. It is ironic that the referendum that so many on both sides expected, and hoped, would provide a clear choice, has come to mimic the murkiness of electoral debate with its lack of informative political discourse and its by efforts to be all things to all people.

Short-term perspectives and obscurantism are the most common features of electoralism in Canada. The politics of campaigning necessitates the presentation of a rosy future accompanied by generalities

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about modalities. As Lucien Bouchard said, "As you've noticed, we have not been very explicit about what kind of mechanism should be set up."

Democracy is not well served by the ways in which electoral politics have come to be conducted in Canada, as a form of brokerage politics in which jockeying for advantage drives out any tendency to debate clear alternatives. The democratic credentials of the post-*virage* politics are much less impressive than were those of the procedure set out in December 1994 by Jacques Parizeau. He laid down a procedure that satisfied almost all the complaints democrats had made about the referendum of 1980, the Meech

Lake process and the run-up to the Charlottetown accord. The government would ask Quebeckers to vote on a specific constitutional text. Wide-ranging public consultations were organized. All Quebeckers were given a chance to consider the draft law in their neighbourhoods and towns. This consultation process was supposed to end with a binding referendum in which sovereignty, defined in the bill, would be voted up or down.

This process was democratic and in many ways a distinct improvement on earlier efforts. Putting a constitutional text to a referendum was supposed to avoid the confusion of the vague 1980 question seeking a "mandate to negotiate sovereignty association." Even if it was not the question about "separatism" that federalists said they wanted, it would be a clear question about change. That such a process would be more democratic than that undertaken by the "eleven white men in suits" that gave us Meech Lake, goes without saying. It was even more open and wide-ranging than the public consultations that led to the Charlottetown accord.

THE PROJET DE SOCIÉTÉ

Nonetheless, the regional and specialized commissions resembled the Charlottetown process in at least one way. The commissioners found—some to their joy, some to their distress—that ordinary citizens treated this opportunity to design their constitutional future very seriously. Those who appeared before the commissions viewed it as a moment of exchange among citizens

Continued, see "Projet de société" on page 116.

"Projet de société,"
continued from page 115.

rather than the simple process of "explanation and clarification" that the PQ originally intended it to be. The commissioners also found, as did Canadian politicians in 1992, that citizens were not willing simply to sit back and let the politicians pontificate. They wanted more details about the consequences of constitutional change. They wanted specificity about what a Quebec state would do with its new powers or about what they would gain, and lose, in an independent Quebec.

The result of a certain enthusiasm for these democratic consultations was that many participated, including federalists who had been initially discouraged from doing so by the boycott of the provincial Liberals. But more than that, many people coming from the grass-roots to testify before the commissions had high expectations. They believed that the government was, indeed, interested in hearing their views, in listening to their concerns and in responding to their calls for further specification of the *projet de société*, which would justify creating a sovereign Quebec.

What was entailed in such calls for specificity? Sometimes, to be sure, it was little more than a convenient new language for speaking of the old fears that the benefits that came from Ottawa were threatened by independence. This was the reading that the proponents of a *virage* gave to the commissions. But often it was much more than that. For many people the questions were: Why choose sovereignty? Will Quebec's constitution provide guarantees of economic and social rights? Will it define the government as having a legitimate role in protecting all citizens of Quebec from the unruly forces of unhappy chance and the markets? Or when Quebec becomes the capital of an independ-

ent country, will it be no more than a neo-conservative Ottawa writ small?

In this era of economic, social and political restructuring, many of the values, as well as the specific programs central to the progressive post-war politics, have been jettisoned by parties and governments in many places. Instead of seeking new expressions of long-held and important values, there is often a tendency to embrace neo-liberal solutions, including their world views and values. Therefore, future citizens of Quebec are rightly concerned about whether an independent Quebec is willing to make commitments to social solidarity, to real equality across social groups and sexes, to guarantees of individual and collective rights, and to an active state. Entrenchment of a progressive welfare state was one manifestation of Québécois nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, the heirs of that movement, many of whom were recently found in Brian Mulroney's neo-conservative party, exhibit much less interest in addressing such matters. Calls for such a progressive *projet de société* are not yet being engaged in any serious fashion.

NO WAY TO FORGE A NEW COUNTRY

There are strategic reasons to avoid it, of course. Both the PQ and BQ are hybrid parties, created by social democrats, technocrats, and free-marketeters. Opening up a discussion of a societal project would risk revealing the fragility of such alliances. Therefore, party elites prefer to speak the banalities of electoralist discourse and focus on the campaign rather than its consequences.

Such big questions are legitimately asked when the agenda is constitution writing. This is because constitutions are declarations about desirable presents and futures, state-

ments of political ideals and concrete arrangements for translating them into practice. They set out a vision of who we are and who we might be. Such definitions of democratic citizenship organize popular understandings of the relationship between the individual and the state, describe the rights and duties of citizens, designate the responsibilities of the state and encourage certain ways of making claims to the government, and empower groups and categories of citizens.

Any hints of answers to big questions are few and far between in the current campaign. The arguments for sovereignty are even more obscured since *le virage*. Indeed, the current strategy can be seen as the fruit of the unwillingness, or the incapacity, of the leaders to respond to the calls for *specification* of more about the post-referendum future than about the potential institutional relationship with Canada. Rather than responding, the process has been redesigned "a campaign," where the model is electoral politics and the goal is winning at any cost. Post-*virage* talk may seek to soothe, but it does not respond to the desire for clarity. Nor is a campaign whose theme sounds so much like that of an election—"a time for change"—any way to forge a new country.

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