

SPECIAL REPORT QUEBEC ON THE EVE—CANADA ON THE EDGE



CANADA WATCH

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

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TALKING AT LAST?

by *Kenneth McRoberts*

For over 30 years now, English Canada and Quebec have been conducting "a debate of the deaf." Time and again, one side has advanced a position, or pursued a policy, only to be both baffled and dismayed by the apparent response of the other.

During the early 1970s, leading English-Canadians embraced the ideal of a bilingual Canada; Quebec responded with Bill 22 and Bill 101. In the late 1970s, Quebec nationalists elaborated a scheme for sover-

eignty association; English Canada rejected it out of hand as a non-starter, unworthy of serious discussion. In 1982, English-Canadians embraced constitutional repatriation and a *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, believing it discharged a promise made to Quebec during the 1980 referendum; in Quebec, leading federalists joined nationalists in denouncing it as a violation of Quebec's rights and interests. English Canada and Quebec did come to a

common position on the Charlottetown accord: each claimed that through the accord it had been humiliated by the other!

AT LAST, DEBATING THE SAME THING

Nonetheless, over the last few months, something quite remarkable occurred: English Canada and French Quebec were actually debating the same topic. To be sure, the topic was Quebec sovereignty—as if the only theme English Canadians and Quebec francophones can

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A SOFT NATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

by *Christian Dufour*

A few months before the referendum on sovereignty takes place in Quebec, most observers are predicting a "no" vote. The sovereigntists are considering whether to change the question in a bid to win the referendum or to postpone the referendum.

At this point, the "no" voters regard the idea of changing the question as an unacceptable manipulation of democracy. It appears to be a last minute alteration of the rules of the game by those who feel they are losing.

There is nothing surprising about the reaction of the "no" voters who do not want to risk losing the referendum. Most of them will also oppose the eventual deferment or cancellation of the referendum.

For many Quebecers, deferring the referendum would only add to the present insecurity. In the context of globalization, Canada, including Quebec, would be terribly affected by international money markets, which dislike uncertainty. Federalists and sovereigntists at least agree on one point: it is time to decide and to ask the clearest question possible

in order to end the crisis of the last 35 years. The country cannot afford such a high level of insecurity while there are so many unresolved economic and social problems.

For those who favour a "no" vote, the defeat of the referendum would mean the death of Quebec nationalism that systematically refuses to cooperate with the rest of Canada.

Why should I worry about a "no" vote since I am not a sovereigntist?

After the signing of the Meech Lake accord, I, for the first time, felt emotionally Canadian. I was convinced that the adoption of the Meech Lake accord would positively

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effectively address together is the termination of their relationship. But at least they were talking about the same thing.

In the past, with some significant exceptions, English-Canadian observers had not been prepared to subject Quebec sovereignty to sustained analysis. Most had been content simply to evoke the horrors of the economic catastrophe that Quebec would surely suffer.

In recent months, even the fiercest antagonists of sovereignty have felt obliged to elaborate detailed arguments about the consequences of a "yes" vote. For instance, in order to prove that Quebec can secede on only the most horrendous of terms, Patrick Monahan carefully outlined a series of political and legal obstacles to a negotiated settlement. In doing so, he may have been stacking the deck—maximizing the number of hurdles and setting each barrier at the highest possible level. And he may have underestimated the pressures that would exist for a negotiated settlement precisely because the consequences of failure could be so horrendous. But he did subject the sovereignty option to a detailed analysis, drawing upon the available scholarly literature to do so.

Even more striking is the readiness of some to consider seriously the possibility that Quebec sovereignty might be secured on less than catastrophic terms and to try to identify the conditions that would make this possible. In particular, a 400-page study by Robert Young draws upon a wealth of materials, both Canadian and comparative, to do precisely that.

Just a few years ago, such a debate among leading English-Canadian intellectuals over the consequences of Quebec sovereignty

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would have been unthinkable. A variety of factors might explain this change. In part, the sovereignty option has presented itself with a new urgency. Sovereignty could not be as readily dismissed, once the Parti québécois was no longer linking it to a comprehensive economic association. Beyond that, the Parizeau government's apparent determination to secure sovereignty, through unilateral declaration if necessary, gave the proposal a new urgency. Finally, three decades of continued

frustration with Quebec clearly have taken their toll in English Canada. The last few years saw the rise of something unprecedented: English Canadians actually making a sustained argument that Quebec secession should be welcomed rather than feared.

**PROJET DE SOCIÉTÉ:
THE NEED TO JUSTIFY**

Yet, if English Canada and Quebec were finally addressing the same theme, it soon became apparent that

they were doing so in quite different terms. Whereas for English Canada the debate over the political and economic consequences of Quebec sovereignty was a new debate, for Quebec it is very much an old one. Thus, Quebec's regional consultations soon revealed that attention had shifted from the "what" and "how" of sovereignty to a more difficult question: the "why" of sovereignty. In particular, nationalists called for a projet de société that would describe the type of Quebec society sovereignty would create.

What had seemed self-evident in the past was no longer so. In the late 1970s, compelling reasons for sovereignty could be found in the need to reinforce the status of French in Quebec and to unleash the potential of the Quebec state to develop Quebec's economy and to implement a distinctively social democratic agenda. After 18 years of Bill 101, and with the current neo-liberal onslaught on the state, such arguments have lost much of their credibility.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the option that some Eng-

lish-Canadian academics and intellectuals have been so earnestly assessing over the past few months is rejected by the majority of Québécois. Nor is this apparent rejection of sovereignty the result of English Canada's recent contribution to the debate. Within Quebec the lines were already drawn well before it began. In effect, a feature of the sovereignty proposition that compelled this new debate in English Canada, its clarity, was precisely its downfall in Quebec. Defined as it is currently by the Parizeau government, sovereignty entails an abrupt break with Canadian political institutions while providing little assurance about the economic circumstances of a sovereign Quebec.

Not too long ago, the general mood in Quebec favoured clarity. With the collapse of Meech, francophone Quebec had felt totally rejected: English Canada had found unacceptable even the minimalist of terms for accommodating Quebec. Only sovereignty could provide the equally uncategorical response that Quebec's national humiliation re-

quired. By 1995, as passions have cooled, so has the need for sovereignty.

As a result, debate in Quebec seems to be shifting away from a rigid definition of sovereignty and back to options that the rest of Canada has always dismissed. At its recent conference, Lucien Bouchard secured the commitment of the Bloc québécois not only to explore the potential terms of an economic association between a sovereign Quebec and Canada, but also to imagine how the two might be linked by common political institutions, including a parliament. In effect, Quebec may once again be seeking to engage English Canada in a debate over sovereignty association—a debate that English Canada will be quite disposed to reject out of hand.

DEBATING THE RENEWAL OF CANADA RATHER THAN ITS TERMINATION

There are moments in the past when English Canada and French

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Quebec came close to engaging each other on the terms of re-creating their relationship rather than ending it. In the late 1970s, the threat of sovereignty had, in fact, impelled federalist thinkers to develop a formula for a "renewed federalism." In particular, the P  pin-Robarts Task Force on National Unity, commissioned by the federal government and which brought together leading federalists from both English Canada and French Quebec, offered the prospect of an asymmetrical federalism. The Quebec Liberal party's beige paper offered important measures for accommodating Quebec within federalism. However, Pierre Trudeau undercut this historic opportu-

nity by ignoring the P  pin-Robarts report and (we now know) by securing Claude Ryan's commitment to put the beige paper on the back burner. Ten years later, the Meech Lake accord offered a similar prospect of rapprochement, but was undone by the combined effect of Trudeau's personal intervention and the weight of the constitutional changes that he had secured in 1982.

In its dismissal of such notions as asymmetrical federalism, the Trudeau vision of Canada offered "clarity." But this clarity was as inappropriate to the Canadian polity as is the clarity of the Parizeau conception of Quebec sovereignty. In a sense, the Trudeau and separatist visions are mirror images of each other. The former denies Quebec's specificity

whereas the latter takes it to the ultimate step. Indeed, both are rooted in Quebec of the 1960s, which spawned the separatist movement and launched Trudeau on his crusade to combat Quebec nationalism by implanting his alternative visions of Quebec and of Canada.

Now, in the mid-1990s, could we hope to engage in a redefinition of Canada on a new basis, whether it be asymmetrical federalism, confederalism, or some other formula? Or are we bound to continue the dialogue de sourds that we know so well?

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change the future of this country. Even today, I cannot help asking English Canadians whether or not they were in favour of such an agreement. Even though most of my friends have become sovereigntists, I remained opposed to the Charlottetown agreement, which would have worsened an already difficult situation. I may well belong to the "soft nationalists" whom the PQ referred to in a recent document. I am first faithful to Quebec, but also attached to Canada.

Despite its sometimes annoying dogmatism, sovereignty is still at the heart of Quebec nationalism. I would go so far as to argue that a strong sovereign movement in Quebec is good for Quebec as well as for Canada.

If the referendum on sovereignty actually takes place as announced by the PQ government, I may very well vote "yes" even though I am

not a sovereigntist. I will vote "yes" because I am convinced that a "no" vote would be the worst scenario possible for Quebec and Canada. I will also vote "yes" because I cannot believe in a total separation of Quebec from Canada.

The "purs et durs" sovereigntists may regard me as a colonized individual; the federalists may find me naive. However, the attachment of the Quebecers to Canada is too deep to justify a complete break. It is unclear to me how a "yes" vote could lead to the type of independence of which some Quebecers dream.

This being said, a "yes" vote is becoming less and less of an eventuality. Quebecers are unlikely to favour the sovereigntist project that is now being presented to them. There is evidence that this attitude is not going to change in the coming months.

One frequently argues that Quebec would be dangerously affected by a "no" vote at the next referen-

dum because it would be the second "no" vote in 15 years. It would be then preferable for Quebec and Canada to postpone the referendum rather than get a "no" vote.

In a meeting organized by Cit   Libre, St  phane Dion, who defends the status quo, claimed that Quebec nationalism has been essentially modern, open, and positive since its beginning. St  phane Dion does not seem to realize, though, that another "no" vote would transform Quebec nationalism into a negative and frustrated movement inside Canada. What a contrast it would be with the essentially constructive role that the Bloc qu  b  cois and its leader have so far played in Ottawa.

A "no" vote would dramatically accelerate the disintegration of this country, which started 30 years ago with the Quiet Revolution and the unwillingness of Canada's elites to recognize Quebec nationalism. On the other hand, if the percentage of the "yes" votes were greater than that of the 1980 referendum, the