

SPECIAL REPORT QUEBEC ON THE EVE—CANADA ON THE EDGE



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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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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

political system of Canada would feel threatened and try to make Quebec more dependent on Canada. This happened in 1982 when the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* was passed.

A "no" vote would forever destroy every chance for Quebec to separate and Canada would pay a terrible price. Quebec nationalism

would turn inward on itself and fester. Canada would suffer the negative consequences.

Deferring the referendum is likely to generate an equally negative reaction on the part of the federalists who want to get rid of Quebec nationalism. We will then have to rely on those English Canadians who are

Quebec's friends and who fought for the ratification of the Meech Lake accord. This is not much to hope for, but there is not much else.

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THE LESSONS OF MEECH LAKE AND CHARLOTTETOWN

by Richard Simeon

Meech Lake was an attempt at a focused, limited, reform aimed primarily at meeting Quebec's five demands for signing on to the 1982 *Constitution Act*. In substance, it was defeated because it failed to address the much broader set of constitutional agendas that had emerged since 1982. In its process, Meech represented the failure of the strictly intergovernmental constitutional review process to respond to the changed political dynamics generated by increased demands for citizen participation generally and by the 1982 requirement of legislative ratification for constitutional amendments.

Charlottetown was a response to these objections. Rather than being limited and exclusive, it sought to be inclusive, embracing a vast range of changes. And, unlike Meech, the process embodied a far greater range of consultation and debate in the early stages, an expanded table in the intergovernmental negotiations, and, of course, popular judgment in the referendum of October 1992. If Meech demonstrated the failings of a closed process and a narrow agenda, Charlottetown demonstrated the difficulties associated with an expanded agenda and a more democratic process.

The political circumstances surrounding the Meech debate between 1987 and 1990 and the Charlottetown process in 1991-92 are in many ways different from the circumstances we face in 1995. The fiscal crisis weighs far more heavily over the whole process than it did before. In Quebec, the PQ holds power. In Ottawa, the majority Liberal government maintains a level of trust and confidence far higher than that of the previous Mulroney government. On the other hand, with the Bloc forming the official opposition and the Reform party constituting the alternative government for English Canada, Ottawa enters this debate without the broad cross-party agreement on constitutional issues and the unity question that has characterized previous governments. This will make it harder for the Liberals to speak unequivocally for Canada during and especially after the referendum campaign.

Perhaps the most general lesson of Meech and Charlottetown was to underline and reinforce the mutual incomprehension between Quebec and the rest of Canada (ROC). As Richard Johnston and his associates show, Meech failed in large measure because citizens in the rest of Canada rejected the concept of Que-

bec as a distinct society and more generally the concept of a Canada constituted by the presence of two (or more) national communities. Individualist Charter values ruled out the more collectivist implications of distinct societies. New identities—gender, multiculturalism and others—challenged the traditional pre-eminence of linguistic and regional identities as the basis for constitutional discourse. Increasingly, Canadians outside Quebec debated their own society in terms that, if not hostile to Quebec, no longer saw national unity in the traditional sense as the chief challenge facing Canadians.

In the Charlottetown round, all the differing interpretations were on the table. In the end, however, the single most important reason for rejecting the accord outside Quebec was that it made too many concessions to the province; and the single most important reason for rejecting it in Quebec was that it did not respond sufficiently to Quebec's aspirations. Indeed, the two communities saw the Charlottetown process in dramatically different terms: for Quebec, it was the search for "Meech Plus"—to wipe out the bitter experience of the "rejection" in Meech. It was to respond to the heightened expectations for greater powers generated by the wave of nationalist feeling in the province

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