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longstanding and deeply rooted problems such as the relationship between Quebec and the rest of Canada, or the situation of disadvantaged people. The demand that news always be new effectively precludes debate over the central problems inherent in our structural relationships. From this perspective, historic inequalities and discontents are old news and, hence, boring. The media's bias is also hypocritical because it is clear from reading or watching daily coverage of these events that the media are happy to provide a platform for those very predictable voices from the right that advocate dismantling Canada's social programs and the aspirations of Quebec. The media's commitment to the ostensibly new is actually a commitment to the old and powerful.

As a result of these combined behaviours on the part of the government and the media, the space for inclusive political debate by progressive political forces is diminished. That this shrinking of democratic space is dangerous, given the enormity of the issues facing us, is obvious. It is essential now that progressive groups in the rest of Canada invent new ways to take political space in order to ensure that we can participate in decisions regarding our relationship with Quebec and the shape of the future.

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## THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM: THE LONG VIEW

### Part Two of a Two-Part Series

by Alan Cairns

#### ALL QUIET ON THE REST OF CANADA FRONT?

Rest of Canada (ROC) is a residual category. ROC is headless. No government speaks to it or for it. Yet, it clearly has a potential existence as a successor state, or several, should the referendum pass and Quebec secede. The Quebec referendum, therefore, is a forcing ground for ROC self-consciousness. Given the inhibitions that prevent the federal and provincial governments outside Quebec from fostering and defining ROC, these tasks will be undertaken by academics, journalists, editorialists, publicists, participants in "Whither Canada?" conferences, writers of letters to the editor, and other uncoordinated activists imagining alternative futures for Canadians outside of Quebec.

What once was unthinkable and unthought—Canada without Quebec—begins to enjoy a furtive existence as a future that might happen and this future begins to be fleshed out by those who live by the pen. At the level of everyday consciousness, a dim recognition grows that Canada may turn out to be a transient experience on the road to smaller futures. Thus, the Quebec referendum, in which ROC is cast in the role of an audience, is nevertheless a powerful socializing experience for non-Québécois. The brutally simple distinction between who is in the audience and who is casting votes is, in itself, an inevitable stimulant for non-Québécois to think of future patterns of statehood in which Québécois are foreigners. As the "nation that dares not speak its name"

(Phil Resnick) struggles to the surface, it is aided in its search for an identity by volumes such as *English Canada Speaks Out* (Jack Granatstein and Kenneth McNaught, eds.), *Plan B: The Future of the Rest of Canada* (Gordon Gibson), and *Thinking English Canada* (Phil Resnick).

The Reform party's role in the politics leading up to the referendum deserves special attention for it is positioned, in terms of its geographic support and hardline constitutional philosophy, to play a vanguard role for ROC if the polls indicate a possible "yes" victory. Furthermore, it is not constrained as other parties are, from saying what some of its supporters think, by the possession of office.

The natural tendency to concentrate attention on the referendum's unfolding in Quebec should be supplemented by recognizing and monitoring the less visible evolution of ROC self-consciousness outside Quebec. Even if the referendum is decisively defeated, the renewed togetherness in one country of Canadians will be understood as a fragile relationship, not as an unquestioned component of a stable order. A mutual wariness will survive and a sense of conditionality and contingency will not easily fade from memory following the second attempt of Quebec governments in 15 years to take their people out of Canada.

If a victory of the "no" is only marginal, if a francophone majority has voted "yes," if the "yes" support is considerably higher than it was in

1980, with the likely consequence that another referendum will take place before too long—then even limited understanding of the evolution of ROC self-consciousness will be crucial knowledge for anyone seeking to reduce future shock in the next decade for Canadians.

An additional point needs underlining. The virtually monolithic unwillingness of the political elites outside of Quebec to favourably and publicly discuss a future Canada from which Quebec has departed may produce at least a mini-version of the Meech Lake gap between official elites and masses. This time, the tendency of the grassroots level to say “let Quebec go” will be fostered by hotlines and by a handful of politicians who will succumb to the temptation to break ranks.

#### **THE ROAD FROM ETHNIC TO CIVIC NATIONALISM**

In Quebec, the referendum will be a case study of the distance that society has travelled on the road from ethnic to civic nationalism, to employ the language of the sociologist Raymond Breton. To what extent do the politics and rhetoric of the referendum stimulate or transcend the ethnic, linguistic, and national cleavages among the anglophone, allophone, francophone, and aboriginal citizenry of Quebec? What is the relative incidence of an adapted Gertrude Stein thesis that “a vote is a vote is a vote,” versus the competing position that the votes of the members of the majority francophone community—on whose behalf, after all, independence is sought—should be worth more than the votes of the others? How the politics of the referendum campaign are played out along, of course, with the actual voting data, will reveal the extent to which Quebec is internally a deeply federal society with, in Charles Taylor’s term, its own “deep diversities” within. Compet-

ing statements about how large the “yes” majority will have to be to have its legitimacy accepted, will indirectly be statements about the presence or absence of a belief that the Quebec people are not a homogeneous people for whom simple majoritarianism is good enough.

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phenomenon that will modify how we think of each other and that will rearrange the cleavages and identities we have inherited. No matter who wins or loses, we will all be different people when the referendum is history.

Referenda are not football games that produce discrete results of only momentary significance (see Part One of this article, *Canada Watch*, January/February 1995). They are instead transforming events that do not leave the psyches, even of those seemingly relegated to the audience, unchanged by the brush with history that a referendum necessarily is.

#### **A PRE-REFERENDUM POSTSCRIPT**

The referendum observer should not forget one powerful lesson from our recent constitutional experience. The politics of the referendum do not stop after the votes are counted. Those referendum elites who sought votes up until the polls are closed

will transmute themselves into historians after the results are in. Before the sweat has dried on the ballots, a new battle to provide serviceable interpretations of the results will be under way. We have seen it before. The political success of the indépendantistes in affixing the betrayal label to Trudeau’s role in the 1980 referendum campaign, given the contents of the 1982 *Constitution Act*, is only the most dramatic example of the adversarial politics of fashioning collective memories that are inherent in later interpretations of highstakes constitutional politics. In fact, the professional manipulators of memory will have done considerable preparatory work throughout the campaign with their suggestions of bias, unfairness, deception, etc.

The two major reasons for abusing history are to delegitimize a victory by one’s opponents and to explain away one’s own defeat as not really having the negative meaning that the numbers appear to suggest. Shrewd politicians will keep the preceding in mind throughout the campaign. Shrewd observers should not forget that they are observing shrewd politicians.

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