

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF A "NO" VOTE

by Alain Noël

When they voted "no" in 1980, Quebecers did not simply deny the Lévesque government a mandate to negotiate sovereignty association, they also created the conditions that made possible the constitutional reforms of 1982. These reforms were not demanded by Quebecers and are still considered illegitimate, even by the unambiguously federalist leader of the "no" forces in Quebec, Daniel Johnson. The 1980 vote also signalled the end of a reformist political era in Quebec and the beginning of a period marked by individualism, conservative politics, and rising income inequalities.

The situation in 1995 is quite different. First, the referendum on the Charlottetown accord left Canada with a constitutional stalemate. Fundamental transformations comparable to what was achieved by Pierre Elliott Trudeau in 1982 are now inconceivable and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien can be trusted when he stresses that he was elected not to talk about the constitution. Second, in Ottawa and in the provinces, the politics of state and province building have given way to the politics of deficit and debt reduction, a shift that, like the constitutional situation, makes ambitious reforms unlikely. Third, the stronger than ever global market forces and the new international politics of competitiveness also tend to reduce the range of policy options and, as a consequence, appear to limit the prospects for major change.

A DIFFERENT STATUS QUO?

The difficulty of undertaking major reforms does not mean, however, that nothing can happen. If Quebecers vote "no," there may

not be a constitutional big bang transforming the country, but much will change. Sovereignists are wrong to equate a "no" vote with the status quo or to claim, as Lise Bissonnette did in a recent editorial, that federalists have nothing to offer, no positive vision worth discussing. When advocates of the "no" side insist on the flexible character of Canadian federalism, on the evolving nature of the status quo, or on the workability of administrative arrangements, they speak the truth. If they succeed, the end result of their actions will be, indeed, a different status quo. Following a "no" victory in a referendum on sovereignty, what Quebecers call a *projet de société* will gradually unfold: it will be a Canadian *projet de société*, built on the current constitutional stalemate and rooted in the new conception of Canadian citizenship that emerged in the 1980s; and, of course, it will be very different from what those in Quebec who talk of a *projet de société* are demanding.

A SOLIDARISTIC VISION FOR THE FUTURE?

Writing about the welfare state a few years ago, Canadian sociologist John Myles stressed its resilience in the face of forceful but ineffective political attacks. Far from being dismantled, the welfare state survived in the 1980s more or less in the same form it had taken in the reformist 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, Myles noted, social policy appeared "dead"; there were no clear visions between "an exhausted (liberal) social policy paradigm and a utopian (conservative) one." Still vague when Myles wrote in the mid-1980s, such visions have now clearly

emerged. In advanced capitalist democracies, a major conflict is, in fact, developing over social policy reform. This conflict involves two basic alternatives. On the one hand, there is a liberal strategy whereby high unemployment, precarious job security, and income polarization are accepted as unavoidable and force a redrawing of social programs to better fit the new situation. On the other hand, one finds what could be called a corporatist or social democratic strategy, where the deterioration of incomes and jobs is resisted and where welfare and labour market programs are used to maintain and possibly redefine solidarity. Of course, there are as many variants as there are countries (and even more if one considers regions), but a fundamental difference remains between the basic vision of a country like Great Britain, where the prime minister could state "there is no such thing as a society," and that of countries still committed to income redistribution, high levels of employment, and universal social programs.

Traditionally, Canada has stood near the centre of this continuum with a liberal welfare state that integrated some universalist elements—for instance, health care. Under pressure, however, a drift toward the liberal end of the spectrum seems likely. This drift is rather natural for a welfare state that is primarily liberal, and it can already be read in the documents on social policy reforms issued by the Liberal government in 1994 and 1995, where unemployment tends to be associated with social program dependency or other individual failings. Most important, such a drift appears hard to resist in this country because in the post-Meech, post-Charlottetown Canada, "there is no such thing as a society."

In the United States, writes Pierre Rosanvallon in a recent book on the welfare state, the central figure of

social policy is the victim. Unable to make gains through the political process, individuals and groups seek redress through the courts. There, they define themselves, not as citizens committed to some shared standard of living, but instead as victims capable of staking their claims in court. In parallel, social and labour market policies are thought of less in terms of labour market and broad adjustment problems than in terms of individual deficiencies and incentives. Again, as the focus is on the fate and behaviour of victims, Canada's constitutional deadlock pushes us in the same direction. Unable to define and recognize the basic communities around which solidarity could be built, Canadians are increasingly seeking solutions through the pursuit of specific interests, in the courts or in the political arena. "Whether it be provinces, women, Aboriginals or the disabled, all can now be treated as groups seeking the protection of the Charter for their own group interests," writes political scientist Michael M. Atkinson in a recent discussion of Canadian democracy;

"rights are means of obtaining or furthering these interests to establish relatively weak bonds of association."

My point is not that the Charter is wrong and should be discarded, but rather that it is insufficient as a foundation for political community. We are told, observes sociologist Fernand Dumont in his book *Raisons communes*, that the constitution is not important. It remains, Dumont rightly points out, our fundamental social contract. If even such a contract does not matter, how can citizens put faith in politics as a means of doing things collectively and of promoting solidarity?

Quebec, like Canada, has a liberal institutional and political heritage, and whether or not it remains within Canada, it will have to struggle to define its own version of a generous welfare state for the 1990s. Nothing in this respect is guaranteed. Insofar as it understands itself as a political community united by more than individual and group rights, however, Quebec would at least have the possibility of adopt-

ing such a solidaristic vision for the coming years, and so could Canada without Quebec, which would thus be confronted with the necessity of rethinking its own status as a nation. Such a possibility would, to some, be destroyed by a "no" vote in 1995 because a "no" vote would also be the defeat of the left in Quebec. It would announce the definitive triumph of the "evolving status quo," of a "flexible federalism" that cannot amend itself and cannot even acknowledge the obvious existence of political communities within Canada. In the social policy documents prepared by the federal government in 1994 and 1995, the provinces in general, and Quebec in particular, are hardly ever mentioned. In the aftermath of a "no" vote, Quebec, along with the rest of Canada, is likely to drift toward the liberal model and gradually forget the values of solidarity that in the past many saw as a core component of Canadian identity.

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THE REFERENDUM DEBATE AND THE ABORIGINAL QUESTION IN QUEBEC

by Daniel Salée

In a recent *Maclean's* article, the grand chief of the Quebec Crees, Matthew Coon Come, is quoted as saying: "Quebec secession is a major threat to our status and our rights. The draft bill for sovereignty amounts to unilateral abrogation of aboriginal rights as defined under the Canadian Constitution as well as in numerous previous treaties and agreements in particular the James Bay and Northern Quebec agreement." In the same article, David Cliche, PQ spokesman for the gov-

ernment on aboriginal rights, gives a somewhat arrogant response: "I'm offering them a chance to get on board. The train's coming whether they like it or not."

Since the Oka crisis, the relationship between aboriginal nations and the Quebec government has been strained, to say the least. Oka, the Great Whale project in Northern Quebec, endless, arduous, and seemingly fruitless negotiations over land claims, and the oft-repeated, adamant unwillingness of Quebec's

First Nations to support the current government's drive for sovereignty are but some of the milestones of a political face-off that, in the last five years, seems to have gone from bad to worse.

On the sovereignty issue, Quebec's First Nations and the government are at loggerheads with each other. Land claims are a major stumbling block. Most aboriginal nations want to see their inherent right over ancestral lands respected, and ultimately seek separate boundaries. Until now, however, no Quebec government has been willing to entertain the thought of totally

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