

DID THE QUEBEC GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY FAIL DURING THE PRE-REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN?

by Guy Lachapelle

Since the December 5 announcement of the Quebec government's strategy and the proposed question that asks Quebecers to endorse a draft bill declaring Quebec's sovereignty, support for sovereignty has remained relatively constant at around 40 percent among all Quebecers. However, the questions asked by the polling firms differ so widely that the picture is blurred; since the early 1980s, the sovereignty association option has been the most favoured option of Quebecers. Is such a partnership feasible?

The debate over the last four months has left many Quebecers torn between different scenarios. It is problematic that clear answers have not been given by either the federalist or the sovereigntist camps. It is evident that sovereignty means different things to Quebecers. As a result, the final outcome will depend on how the Parti québécois strategy evolves and how sovereignty is presented. Sovereignty means independence—every Quebecer knows that. But there are several ways of achieving it and, contrary to 1980, the Quebec government has left all the doors open with its draft bill to modify the question and the process. Quebecers, asked about the proposed question in the draft bill, would be unable to quote its wording; the one thing they know is that it concerns Quebec sovereignty.

All this said, it is obvious that the government's optimal strategy was to call a referendum this spring. Jacques Parizeau always thought, even after the election of the Parti

québécois in 1976, that the PQ should have followed Pierre Bourgault's advice by holding a referendum as quickly as possible in the first months after its election. René Lévesque had a different agenda and was convinced that by showing Quebecers that his government could be more than a good government, the referendum would be won without any difficulty. We know the rest of the story, but the most important point is that the option of the Parti québécois was much higher in the polls between January and April 1980 than the sovereignty option of Jacques Parizeau is today. The magic number for the Quebec government is 62.5 percent support among francophones. But to be really sure of winning the referendum, it will need a margin of 5 percent—that is, 67.5 percent among francophones.

Nonetheless, the pre-referendum campaign has attained one of its major objectives: clarifying what Quebecers want. Almost two-thirds of Quebecers are opposed to seeing the Quebec government hold the same powers as today; 35 percent would like to see more powers for Quebec inside the Canadian federation; 33 percent prefer a form of sovereignty association; and 7 percent are strong independentists. If the Quebec government proposed to voters "the traditional Quebec demands" (that is, from the Tremblay commission in 1956 to the Allaire report of the Liberal party and the Bélanger-Campeau commission), the likelihood of losing such a referendum would be less problematic. More important, it would represent the first time in Quebec's history

that such a position was endorsed by a majority of Quebecers.

The central question is whether Jacques Parizeau is able to recognize the necessity of postponing his referendum on sovereignty. The answer should be yes, for two reasons. First, the level of satisfaction with the Quebec government remains high. On average, 54.7 percent of all Quebecers are very satisfied with the Parizeau government, only 29.3 percent are dissatisfied, and 16 percent have no opinion. The second important element is that Quebecers are ready today to reelect the Parti québécois. If they had this opportunity, the Parti québécois would get around 42.3 percent of the vote as opposed to 24.3 for the Quebec Liberal party (PLQ), a difference of 17.4 points. The most troubling development for the provincial Liberal party is the erosion of its popular support among francophone voters who now favour the Parti action démocratique (ADQ) of Mario Dumont. The Léger et Léger poll of January indicated that the ADQ was leading with 18.6 percent against 17.6 for the PLQ among francophones. This is the first time in modern provincial political history that the Quebec Liberal party has slipped so low.

Several factors can explain the difficult situation of the Quebec Liberal party. First, the PLQ refused to participate in the Regional Commission on Sovereignty, leaving the floor to Mario Dumont and his supporters. Second, the party of Daniel Johnson has no constitutional platform that can differentiate this party from the federal Liberal party. Even if the leader of the Quebec Liberal party does not like to hear that the status quo means that Quebec will become a province like the others,

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his answer to this more centralist viewpoint has not been clearly explained. Even if we know that he prefers to say that a “no” vote will set the table for more administrative agreements between Ottawa and Quebec, the constitutional stance of his party remains obscure. The CBC-CROP poll indicated that 51 percent of Quebecers agree that the status quo is preferable to sovereignty even if the same 51 percent judge that a “no” vote will put the Quebec government in a difficult situation.

The overall pre-referendum campaign has indicated clearly to the Quebec government what to do if it wants a “yes” vote from Quebecers. From this point of view, the sovereignty issue can be put on the back burner for a few years, which is the time needed to reduce the transition costs. More important, a referendum on a new partnership offered by the Quebec government, the ADQ, and a vote by the majority of Quebecers can have an important effect and create the necessary climate for a step forward. If Ottawa and the provinces refuse such an agreement, the Quebec government will have all the legitimacy to push further its sovereignty project. More importantly, it is essential for the Quebec government to demonstrate its ability to understand Quebecers’ ambiguities. Quebecers’ interests should be above party interests.

Guy Lachapelle is a Professor of Political Science at Concordia University.



Trend of Opinions in Quebec Relative to Sovereignty Since the Election of September 12, 1994

Year	Source of data	All Adult Quebec Citizens (Francophones Only)			Number
		In favour	Opposed	Undecided	
1994 ¹	Léger et Léger/ November 17-22	35.4 (41.2)	42.1 (35.3)	22.5 (23.5)	1005 (N/A)
1994 ²	SOM/ December	32.0 (37.0)	44.0 (37.0)	24.0 (26.0)	1022 (N/A)
1994 ³	Léger et Léger/ December 9-14	37.0 (45.0)	46.0 (37.0)	17.0 (18.0)	1010 (N/A)
1994	Léger et Léger/ December	41.5 (49.0)	46.1 (39.0)	12.4 (12.0)	603 500
1994 ⁴	Angus Reid/ December 17-21	39.0 (N/A)	51.0 (N/A)	10.0 (N/A)	401 (N/A)
1994 ⁵	CROP/ January 5-9	49.0 (N/A)	51.0 (N/A)	N/A (N/A)	624 (N/A)
1995 ⁶	Créatec +/CROP/ SOM/January 11-19	37.0 (42.0)	43.0 (37.0)	20.0 (21.0)	10011 8905
1995	Léger et Léger/ January 19-23	40.6 (47.3)	46.0 (38.6)	13.4 (14.1)	1001 835
1995 ⁷	CROP-Environics/ February 2-8	38.0 (48.0)	57.0 (52.0)	5.0 (N/A)	764 656
1995	Angus Reid/ February 15-20	42.0 (N/A)	54.0 (N/A)	5.0 (N/A)	385 (N/A)
1995	Léger et Léger/ February 21	44.4 (N/A)	55.6 (N/A)	N/A (N/A)	N/A (N/A)
1995	Léger et Léger/ March 16-22	44.8 (44.0)	55.2 (37.0)	N/A (19.0)	1005 (N/A)
Average for the 9 surveys with undecided:		38.0 (43.6)	47.7 (37.3)	14.3 (19.1)	
Since January 1st:		39.4 (44.4)	50.0 (37.5)	10.9 (18.1)	

N/A: Not available

Questions: (In English if available)

- 1 Si un référendum avait lieu aujourd’hui, voteriez-vous POUR ou CONTRE la souveraineté du Québec?
- 2 Êtes-vous tout à fait d’accord, assez d’accord, assez en désaccord ou tout à fait en désaccord avec le projet de souveraineté tel qu’il est décrit dans l’avant-projet de la loi sur la souveraineté du Québec?
- 3 If a referendum was held today, would you answer “yes” or “no” to the question: “Are you in favour of the act passed by the National Assembly declaring the sovereignty of Quebec?”
- 4 Based on how you feel right now, will you vote “yes” or “no” in the upcoming referendum on Québec sovereignty?
- 5 Si le référendum sur le projet de loi sur la souveraineté avait lieu aujourd’hui, voteriez-vous oui ou non à une proposition visant à faire du Québec un pay souverain ne faisant plus partie du Canada?
- 6 À la question suivante: «Êtes-vous en faveur de la loi adoptée par l’Assemblée Nationale déclarant la souveraineté du Québec?» Voteriez-vous OUI ou voteriez-vous NON?
- 7 Are you in favour of the bill adopted by the National Assembly declaring the sovereignty of Quebec?