



CANADA WATCH

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

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THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM: THE LONG VIEW

Part One of a Two-Part Series

by Alan Cairns

After a football game is over, all we need to know is who won and who lost. Referendums are not football games. While winning and losing are obviously vital, the politics leading up to the referendum, and the subsequent interpretations of the outcome, are also formative events in the lives of people.

A referendum on independence is a searing, profoundly divisive process that modifies our understanding of who we are—our civic and national identities are deeply engaged, with the result that social

Continued, see "The Long View" on page 46.

A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS FOR A FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE: THE DRAFT BILL ON SOVEREIGNTY AND QUEBEC'S POLITICAL FUTURE

by Daniel Turp

Whether people like it or not, sovereigntists control Quebec's political agenda and fully intend to make use of this situation. This was eloquently demonstrated on December 6, 1994, when the prime minister of Quebec, Jacques Parizeau, in close consultation with the Bloc québécois, tabled a draft bill called *An Act Respecting the Sovereignty of Quebec*, that presents a blueprint for Quebec's political future and unveils the process that allows all

Quebeckers input into the finalizing of the text.

As might have been expected, the main thrust of this agenda is sovereignty, an option that Quebeckers have been debating in one form or another since 1960 and that has come to centre stage since the demise of the Meech Lake accord in 1990. The seventeen articles of the draft bill are,

Continued, see "Draft Bill on Sovereignty" on page 47.

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ARTICLES

The Quebec Referendum:
The Long View
by Alan Cairns 45

A Democratic Process for a
Fundamental Choice:
The Draft Bill on Sovereignty
and Québec's Political Future
by Daniel Turp 45

EDITORIAL

Canada's Politics of
Catharsis 48

ARTICLES

The Moral Case for Secession
by Guy Laforest 50

Charges of Economic
Terrorism Allow Parizeau To
Avoid Tough Questions
by Patrick Monahan 52

The New Kingmakers
by Daniel Latouche 53

Monahan's Constitution:
Dead Branch or Living Tree?
by Alan C. Hutchinson 55

The Unfinished Agenda of
the Charlottetown Accord
by Harry Glasbeek 56

Living With a Lower Dollar
by Tom Kent 58

CRACKS IN THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL CONSENSUS?

Those searching for cracks in the official intergovernmental consensus to keep Quebec in Canada should remember (1) that provincial governments are more likely to break ranks than the federal government, whose very essence is challenged by the Quebec independence movement, and (2) the most likely provincial candidates are the three "have provinces": Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta. The latter two combine wealth with distance from Quebec, and a more Pacific orientation, especially British Columbia. Ontario, in certain circumstances, might consider a separate deal with Quebec for two reasons: (1) its tight economic relationships with Quebec and (2) an appreciation that in a Canada without Quebec, its economic strength and population numbers will have to be significantly underweighted to induce some of the less populous provinces to join Ontario in a new founding.

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"Draft Bill on Sovereignty" continued from page 45.

in this respect, a very able synthesis of positions taken by key actors in the recent debate relating to the sovereigntist option, as well as of studies conducted under the auspices of both the Bélanger-Campeau Commission (1991) and the Commission of the National Assembly established to examine matters relating to Quebec's accession to sovereignty (1992). The proposed process of consultation of the draft bill resembles that which was used for Bélanger-Campeau, and reflects a sincere desire to have Quebeckers of all regions partake in the definition of a sovereign Quebec. This will be accomplished through the drafting of a solemn declaration of sovereignty that will serve as a preamble to the Act and a review of the blueprint for Quebec's political future contained in the body of the draft bill.

The draft bill comes as no surprise to those who have followed the contemporary process of determination of Quebec's political and constitutional future. This process has led Quebeckers to believe that "should a final attempt to renew federalism fail, sovereignty would be the only course remaining" (Bélanger-Campeau Commission

Report, p. 73). For Quebeckers, the failure of the Charlottetown accord now justifies a focus on sovereignty and its definition, rather than on federalism and its renewal.

Yet, such a course of action seems to have provoked an emotional response among the federalists in Quebec and the rest of Canada. They obviously have been shaken by the firm commitment of the Parizeau government to have the debate centre principally on its option, and have expressed great frustration at the fact that the main emphasis will be put on sovereignty rather than on federalism during the forthcoming consultations on Quebec's political future. This reaction is somewhat puzzling because the same voices a few short months ago refused to define a new federalist option for Quebec, saying simply that the burden of proof lies with the sovereigntists. The leader of the official opposition in Quebec and the prime minister of Canada have been very much on the defensive and have used loaded words such as "illegitimate" and "undemocratic" to qualify both the substance and the process of the Quebec government's plan. It seems, however, that these arguments have not had

Continued, see "Draft Bill on Sovereignty" on page 48.

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*"Draft Bill on Sovereignty"
continued from page 47.*

any significant effect on the Quebec electorate. Three consecutive polls recently have indicated a great deal of support for the Quebec government's initiative.


The federalists' great discomfort has led them to a hastily hatched plan to boycott the consultations that the government will be holding this year in February and March. For many sovereigntists, as recent polls show, this attitude is neither constructive nor wise and most probably underlies the fact that federalists in Quebec have very little to say about the political future of Quebec. As Mr. Parizeau put it in the National Assembly, their boycott is a pretext, a "faux-fuyant" for not participating and for preferring to hide their heads in the sand on this issue and promote the *status quo* as they have been doing since the rejection of the Charlottetown accord in October 1992. The Quebec Liberal party would also find itself in the embarrassing position of having to object to many components of the

draft bill on sovereignty that they have, in recent history, endorsed. For example, its leaders signed the *Bélanger-Campeau Report* and voted on the ensuing act, both of which constitute large components of the sovereigntist agenda of the new Quebec government.

Promoters of the *status quo* may sit on the sidelines and continue to question the legitimacy of the process or contemplate a parallel process to denigrate the sovereigntist option. Meanwhile, the Quebec government will be calling on the common sense of Quebeckers, confident of their capacity to debate positively the main features of a future sovereign Quebec and involving them in a truly democratic process. This process will certainly lead to a better understanding of all the dimensions of sovereignty; will shed light on the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the sovereigntist agenda; and prepare Quebeckers to make an informed choice on Quebec's accession to sovereignty. Quebeckers will participate fully and, one can predict, enthusiastically

in a very significant debate that the democratically elected government of Quebec has a clear mandate and responsibility to initiate before calling on the people to make the fundamental choice in a referendum on sovereignty.

And, moreover, Quebeckers will witness the solidarity of the sovereigntist forces, of the Parti québécois and the Bloc québécois, who have closely linked their organizations, and that together with their other partners outside the partisan political sphere will propose a clear sense of direction to Quebeckers. Together they will show that the sovereigntist option is not only legitimate and feasible, but also the best choice for Quebec's future, an option that will incorporate all the most positive aspects of modern democratic values, as we will see during the upcoming debate on the draft bill on Quebec sovereignty.

Daniel Turp is a professor in the Faculty of Law, Université de Montréal and President of the Policy Committee of the Bloc québécois. 

EDITORIAL

CANADA'S POLITICS OF CATHARSIS

by Jamie Cameron

THE POLITICS OF CATHARSIS

The year 1995 finds Canada in the grip of catharsis. There has already been an international run on the Canadian dollar and momentum is building toward Quebec's separation referendum. Under the watchful eye of full diplomatic alert, Premier Parizeau sought a sympathetic hearing for Quebec independence in France. The Bloc québécois has asked to meet with President Clinton during his visit to Ottawa. Mean-

while, with the federal government maintaining a determined silence, the defence of Canada has been taken up by those who are equally determined that this nation should not "go gentle into that good night."

Quebec's separation referendum is presented to the rest of Canada as a simple exercise in democracy. It takes place against a backdrop of numerous failed exercises in democratic constitutional reform. In the circumstances, it is hardly surpris-

ing that Canadians everywhere are confused.

The referendum is Quebec's response to Canada's 1982 patriation and reform of the Constitution. With nine of ten provinces signing on, the patriation of the Constitution in 1982 might have seemed democratic enough. Except that, rightly or wrongly, the province of Quebec withheld its consent. Hence the "moral case for secession" (see Laforest's article in this issue).