



CANADA WATCH

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

Canada Watch is a publication of the York University Centre for Public Law and Public Policy and the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies of York University.

PRIME MINISTER PARIZEAU COMES TO NEW YORK CITY

by Stephen Blank

Prime Minister Parizeau spoke to a "Wall Street audience" at the Americas Society yesterday. Afterward, reporters accompanying him grilled guests on how they felt about a separate Quebec. That was the wrong question. Obviously, no one wants to see Canada divided, but Quebec independence is not really the issue.

Americans do not believe Quebec will leave Canada — and the idea bruited about here recently by an Ontario MP that America's failure to squeeze Quebec would signal

our ultimate aim of grabbing Canadian territory or resources is truly absurd. They are optimistic that Canadians will come to some sort of accommodation as they always have. But American interests are not directly challenged by whether Canada's constitution is changed, by whether Quebec or other provinces create a new relationship with Ottawa or with each other — or even by Quebec independence.

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PREMIER PARIZEAU'S PROJECT: A VERY CANADIAN NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

by David Cameron

In a document tabled in the National Assembly on December 6, Premier Jacques Parizeau said that Quebec's Declaration of Sovereignty will be modeled on the American Declaration of Independence.

Really?

The American document was adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, in the early

stages of a six-year war in which the American colonists fought for their liberty from Great Britain. The American colonists, acknowledging that prudence dictates "that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes," asserted that "when it

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problems that would arise from constitutional changes could be resolved if there is a real desire to solve them. But it is difficult to find this will in Canada at the present time.

This is the issue that Americans have the hardest time coming to terms with. Those who have been up the Meech and Charlottetown hills and down again do not understand why no one is talking, or why the federal government seems unwilling to present a counterproposal to sovereignty particularly when, as Daniel Latouche wrote in the last issue of *Canada Watch*, "the absence of such an alternative is one of the most potent weapons in the hands of the PQ."

Several explanations are available. Latouche and Lucien Bouchard say that Ottawa's more fundamental objective is to re-centralize political power in Canada. Another view is that this is a Quebec-Canadian kind of brinkmanship.

A more straightforward explanation, however, focuses on the exhaustion of elites in Canada. Elites across Canada, including Quebec, exhausted by the search for accommodation, terrified of the political reaction if they should dare raise the issue of the constitution once again, fearful about the economic outlook

and the impact of free trade, alarmed at unemployment levels and deeply discouraged by prospects for young people, have concluded that the time for symbolic solutions is over. Somehow, after all these years, the boil must be lanced.

This pressure for clarity and closure, driven by impatience and exhaustion, may be dangerous and unnecessary. Massive, profound changes are now under way in Canada's, and North America's, economic and political infrastructure.

It would be remarkable, to say the least, if Canadian leaders, renowned for their ability to effect compromise, now conclude that they can no longer tolerate ambiguity and that the one issue that has structured the history of Canada must be at last resolved. Even more ironic, if at the very moment of tremendous change in Canada and all of North America, Canadian leaders should actually force the division of the country.

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becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another ... , a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

What were these causes? More than two dozen specific evils and abuses are listed, all of them demonstrating to the satisfaction of the Continental Congress that "the history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States." These are not peccadilloes; they are black political sins. A few examples:

- the repeated dissolution of legislatures and the refusal to hold elections;
- the obstruction of justice;
- the keeping of standing armies, in times of peace, without civil consent;
- cutting off trade with other parts of the world, imposing taxes on the people without their consent, the denial of trial by jury; and

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- the waging of war against the people ("He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people").

This is the model for the Premier of Quebec's Declaration of Sovereignty?

What causes of separation are offered by the Government of Quebec to satisfy "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind"? In all the documents placed before the National Assembly last week at this solemn moment in history of the people of Quebec, only one cause of separation is mentioned: "to settle definitively the constitutional problem that has been confronting Quebec for several generations." No allegations of tyranny, no abuse of power, no denial of democratic rights, no confiscation of property, no infringement on the liberties of the citizen. Just a "constitutional problem." Thomas Jefferson would weep.

The American colonists were struggling to free themselves from despotism, from the tyrannical oppression of Great Britain.

The difficulty for the separatists of Quebec is that they are already free.

As individuals, they are unquestionably living in one of the freest countries on the face of the globe; protected by the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and a constitutional charter of rights; benefiting from membership in a society that places a high value on respect for freedom and the rights of others; operating in a democratic political system muscular enough to allow a secessionist political party to form the Official Opposition in the Parliament of Canada.

As members of a national community, the separatists are free again.

The vast majority of francophones in Canada live within Quebec, where they make up more than 80 percent of the population. Enjoying the benefits of what is arguably the most decentralized federal system on the globe, their government is free to fashion very much the kind of society that the majority wants — in health care, in education, in social policy, in the structure of the economy and, to a substantial degree, in immigration. Their government is able to borrow abroad, sell hydro-electric energy internationally, engage in quasi-diplomatic representation, set up an "embassy" in Paris larger than that of many sovereign states. The people of Quebec have been free enough to utterly transform their society in little more than three decades, all within the framework of Confederation. When they have pushed on the door, it has opened. This is tyranny? Meanwhile, despite the regrettable fact that the country has been unable to recognize Quebec as distinct society in the constitution, Canada has nevertheless substantially redefined itself to take into account the French fact, which 35 years ago was barely acknowledged as being of national significance. This is oppression?

Quebec separatists implicitly recognize all this. They do not use the language of an oppressed people; that would be silly. Quebecers are already in charge. They do not argue that they need to separate so that the rights and freedoms of their people can be protected properly; they already are. They do not contend that it is their desire to build a new economic order based on different principles; they wish to maintain the existing role of the private sector and they want in, not out of the FTA and NAFTA and GATT and every other economic acronym going. Part company with the Western military alliance? No way: they aim to be part of NATO and NORAD. They

are not fed up with an alien British parliamentary system; in fact, they intend to keep it as is and plan to seek membership in the British Commonwealth.

So why do the separatists want out? What do they want to be free of? A cynic, or a tired federalist, might say that they want out so that they can get back in. They want to be free of the rest of Canada so that they can economically associate with it. They want to separate from the country, but keep Canadian citizenship. They want to secede, but continue to use the Canadian dollar. They want open borders, free movement of people, closer economic ties with Ontario. And Jacques Parizeau is supposed to be far more committed to hard-line independence than René Lévesque was years ago. The next thing you know, they will be saying they want to keep Elizabeth as the Queen of Quebec.

This is a very Canadian national independence movement.

You can see why the rest of the world finds it a little difficult to take our perpetual wrangling too seriously. The idea of seceding from one of the wealthiest and freest democracies in the world makes about as much sense as it would for you to agree to your genial dentist's proposal that he pull all your teeth out so you won't have to worry about cavities.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and the other members of the Continental Congress are, I have no doubt, speechless in heaven.

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