

EDITORIAL

PARIZEAU'S GAME PLAN: JUST A PROPAGANDA EXERCISE?

by Daniel Drache

For good reason, Parizeau's strategy for next year's referendum on sovereignty has been harshly attacked in the English Canada media and by Quebec federalists. If Parizeau succeeds in persuading Quebecers that a "yes" vote is their only constitutional option on the table at this time, it will be game over for the federalist forces. This explains why both Chrétien and Johnson have rejected the government-organized consultation process. Ottawa needs a winning strategy and it has decided to destabilize the consultation process by opting out of it. However, the question is this: by boycotting the consultation process, is it likely to help or hinder the federal and provincial liberals in defeating the referendum?

Federalist forces remember all too vividly the way the Bélanger-Campeau Commission undermined their arguments. The process was fluid, outside of party control and, in the end, the federal liberals got the short-end of the stick. It is easy to see why they do not want a second Bélanger-Campeau Commission at any price.

The larger problem is that public consultation is always fraught with risk for elected governments, whatever their stripe. Certainly, Axworthy has discovered the perils of funding different interest groups to be intervenors in the reform of Canada's social programs. The message they are sending him is not what he wants to hear. So he is not listening. What else is new? Every government wants to control the public agenda and the federal Liberals are masters of the technique.

Even before Axworthy has finished his consultation exercise, Finance Minister Paul Martin is preparing to make further cuts to Canada's UI program and CBC funding; grants to the Canada Council are also going to be axed, despite federal promises to leave both core institutions' budgets unaltered.

Where does this betrayal of the public trust leave the Axworthy reform process? Is it a fraud? At the end of the day, Canadians do not get a chance to vote on these nation-affirming programs. By contrast, all

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significant change to Quebec's place in confederation is to be put to the will of the people in a referendum vote beginning with a broad-based consultation process. In these circumstances, should all popular sector groups stop talking with Mr. Axworthy? Certainly not. If all these groups sit on the sidelines, their concerns will be ignored.

A BROAD-BASED CONSULTATION PROCESS

The substantive issue is not that Parizeau is trying to "bamboozle Quebecers." If anything, he has taken a considerable risk in laying out a strategy that could easily go off the rails. It is an ambitious project

with a number of fail-safe provisions if the public turns against it. In the event that that happens, the whole project can be aborted. Surely this is what democracy is all about. In the final analysis, if Parizeau does not win a majority, the sovereignty bill is not passed.

The charge that the PQ's game plan is a hoax does not make much sense, particularly when one looks at the fine print. In essence, the PQ government is going to appoint 15 regional committees and they will offer Quebecers of all persuasions a voice in deciding their collective future. There will be a representative from the PQ and the Bloc québécois. The Parizeau plan allots three seats to the federalist forces — one to Johnson's provincial Liberals, one to Ottawa, with the third place going to the federal conservatives who have only two seats federally and no seats provincially.

Whatever else one can say, the federalists are at the table and are not under-represented. They should use their position in these regional committees to rally the No forces. In addition to representatives from the political parties, each regional committee will have between seven and ten non-elected members representing various interest groups in the region. The criteria for nominating these individuals still has to be determined by the National Assembly's standing committee.

If the process is to have any legitimacy in the eyes of Quebecers, the PQ government will not be able to appoint simply its "friends." It

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may want to and it may try to do so — it will then face a violent backlash from Quebeckers. But it is not likely to put its entire project in jeopardy for this reason. Parizeau knows full well why the Bélanger-Campeau Commission was so effective. Business, as well as labour, and community groups, as well as representatives from elite and non-elite groups, were at the table shaping its deliberations. The Parizeau plan will reach out to Quebec's civic society, inviting it to participate once again in deciding Quebec's future.

If the PQ government expects to find 200,000 more votes than it received in the recent election, which are needed to win the referendum campaign, it has to involve Quebeckers in an innovative way to break the present constitutional stalemate.

The question is whether Quebeckers will find the process too intense and too emotionally stressful to maintain the high level of interest that Parizeau's scheme requires. There are many unknowns and it is too early to say with certainty whether the consultation process will be frictionless. What is clear, however, as Stephen Blank's analysis of Parizeau's address to the "lords of Wall Street" shows, is that Quebec's economy is in poor shape and that Quebec will be under intense pressure to adopt a leaner and meaner style of government. Even though Parizeau has promised no more "blind" cutting, it is the intent of Paul Martin to test his will.

With the economy so weak, Martin is betting that Quebeckers are likely to tire of the constitutional wars. If this happens, Parizeau will have a very tough time in rallying public opinion to his side because he will be pressed to cut spending in order to reduce Quebec's deficit.

Nonetheless, Parizeau is far ahead of the federalists in articulating a different vision of Quebec and Canada. He has found a way for Quebeckers to affirm their identity and their desire to thrive in North America. His novel approach to Referendum '95 stresses that cultural and socio-economic questions cannot be arbitrarily dissociated. They are, in fact, intimately linked and form the core of Quebec's constitutional demands.

Many Quebeckers must find Parizeau's vision attractive, as well as the fact that his new government is ready to give strong leadership on the constitutional question. The latest opinion poll confirms that the independence option is now supported by roughly 45 percent of Quebeckers, or more than 53 percent of francophones. It would be a mistake for English Canadian opinion leaders to pretend that the draft bill is not the missing piece of the constitutional puzzle.

A large number of Quebeckers are of the view that Parizeau's government is serious in its desire to limit the federal government's power. They seem ready to reject the notion that Quebec needs the support of the other provinces and the federal government before it can resolve the ambiguity surrounding its place in Canada. Foolishly, liberal hardliners have not adjusted to the reality that they are now in the opposition and no longer control Quebec's constitutional agenda.

**THE "EMPTY CHAIR"
STRATEGY**

For this essential reason, then, Daniel Johnson's "empty chair" strategy is problematic in the extreme. He is being petulant rather than strategic. The federalist forces have made a gigantic blunder in deciding to boycott the consultation process now that Mario Dumont and

his party are on board. Other prominent federalists, such as Jean-Paul L'Allier and Marcel Masse, have scrutinized Parizeau's proposal and have been persuaded of its merits. This is surely the most convincing evidence that the PQ government's consultation is not a bogus exercise.

The danger is that Johnson will find himself isolated from mainstream opinion in Quebec. What is even a greater threat is that Ottawa will have no official status during the consultation process and, at every town hall meeting, the chairs for federalist representatives will be unoccupied. Federalists need a better strategy if they expect to defeat Parizeau's vision of a sovereign and independent Quebec sharing economic and social ties with the rest of Canada.

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