

THE REFERENDUM WILL BE CLOSER THAN MANY FEDERALISTS EXPECT

by Patrick Monahan

We are telling Quebeckers to vote "no" and telling you in the other provinces that we will not agree to your interpreting a "no" vote as an indication that everything is fine and can remain as it was before.

— Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, May 1980

In the days immediately following the Quebec election, defenders of Canadian federalism seemed to assume that they already have the sovereignty referendum in the bag. The fact that the Parti québécois polled less than 45 percent of the vote — and just 13,500 votes more than Daniel Johnson's Liberals — was seen as proof positive that Quebeckers would reject sovereignty in a referendum expected in 1995. The Canadian dollar jumped by more than a cent overnight, and within a week was trading in the mid-74 cents US range, on the theory that Canada's political uncertainty "has now been resolved."

Some Quebec sovereigntists attempted to downplay the unexpectedly close election outcome by pointing out that the combined vote totals for the PQ and the fledgling Parti action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) were over 50 percent. But this argument was advanced almost in a half-hearted way, since the PQ could not necessarily count on all of its own supporters to vote "yes" in a referendum, much less those of the ADQ.

Still, while the election results were obviously encouraging for Canadian federalists, it seems a bit premature to be breaking out the champagne. The election outcome indicates that, had Quebeckers been asked to vote in a referendum on sovereignty this past month, they would have decisively voted "no." But the referendum was not held last

month, nor is it likely to be held anytime soon — perhaps as late as spring 1996.

SOVEREIGNTY VERSUS "STATUS QUO"

It has been over 30 years since any politician won a Québec election by advocating the constitutional "status quo." Indeed, the status quo is thought to be so massively unpopular in Quebec that no major party since 1960 has even dared to campaign on this basis — that is, until Daniel Johnson in 1994. (This makes it all the more remarkable that Johnson was able to poll close to 45 percent of the popular vote, and it will certainly force a re-evaluation of the conventional wisdom that Quebec voters oppose the status quo.)

Even Pierre Trudeau found it necessary to renounce the constitutional status quo in his famous "solemn declaration" of May 1980 quoted above. Trudeau was later to seek the lawyer's refuge of pointing out that he never specified exactly what kind of change he had in mind. But his listeners in the Paul Sauvé Arena that evening evidently interpreted his words as a commitment to grant more powers to Quebec, and that is why they jumped to their feet with tears in their eyes and gave him a standing ovation.

Jean Chrétien is not in a position to make that kind of speech this time around. The reason is simple. After the Meech Lake and Charlottetown

accords, it has become obvious that the Canadian constitution is, for all intents and purposes, virtually unamendable. It is, therefore, pointless to suggest reopening constitutional negotiations since any such negotiations are certain to end in failure.

This means that the upcoming referendum will probably feature a showdown between the status quo and sovereignty sides. Defenders of federalism will no doubt point out that the "status quo" is not static, and that Quebec can be granted additional powers through administrative agreements as opposed to formal constitutional change. The problem with this argument is that the premier of Quebec is now Jacques Parizeau rather than Daniel Johnson. Premier Parizeau will almost certainly refuse to enter into any such administrative agreements — even agreements that might grant Quebec additional jurisdiction or powers — precisely to deprive federalists of this possible defence of the status quo.

CONFUSION WITHIN FEDERAL RANKS

Already, many prominent Quebec federalists are expressing dismay at the prospect of having to defend the constitutional status quo. Interim Conservative leader, Jean Charest — who remains the most popular defender of federalism in

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Quebec — is already on record as stating that Quebeckers will have to be offered at least the possibility of "renewed federalism" in return for a "no" vote in the referendum. And the Quebec Liberal party is divided on this question, with some former cabinet ministers favouring the development of a new "constitutional vision" as the platform for the No forces in the referendum.

This confusion within federalist ranks over the precise meaning of a "no" vote seems unimportant as long as support for sovereignty hovers in the 40 to 42 percent range. But with the PQ now controlling the levers of government, support for sovereignty is likely to move slightly upward in the next three to six months. (This will be due to the combined effect of the PQ's "honeymoon" with Que-

bec voters, along with unpopular cuts in federal spending that will be forced on the federal government in an effort to control the deficit.)

If and when the support for Quebec sovereignty comes to within striking distance of a majority (that is, more than 45 percent), the confu-

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sion in the federalist camp could prove very damaging. Within the Quebec Liberal party the pressure to develop some credible offer of "renewed federalism" may well prove overwhelming. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, however, is likely to maintain his strategy of offering "good

judgment" and avoiding all talk of constitutional revision.

If Quebeckers are asked to choose between the status quo and sovereignty, the outcome is far from certain. But one thing that is clear is that federalists will be in big trouble if they appear divided. Jacques Parizeau can be expected to exploit even the hint of divisions within the federalist ranks, arguing that his opponents cannot even agree among themselves about the meaning of a "no" vote. That's why it is essential that federalists settle this question now, rather than trying to resolve their differences in the hothouse atmosphere of a referendum campaign.

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WAIT-AND-SEE STRATEGY NOT NEW FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

by Mary Ellen Turpel

The election of a PQ majority government with the promise of a referendum on secession is a loud political alarm bell for the 14 First Nations and Inuit whose territories are caught within the boundaries of Quebec. While the national press and federal government downplay the consequences of the September 12 vote, such a strategy could prove disastrous for aboriginal peoples. Can First Nations and Inuit silently gamble on a federalist response to a referendum question?

Clearly not — especially when they consider who proposes to defend their interests — namely, the federal government, the very same government that has been as much if

not more of an obstacle in self-government and land claims negotiations.

Although federal Minister of Indian Affairs Ron Irwin gave First Nations in Quebec his assurances that the federal government will fulfill its political and legal obligations to them in any secession scenario, how real is this promise and what does it mean?

The current federal strategy is to downplay the secession situation, to politically reinforce that the federation works, and to enlist provinces in an effort to eliminate inter-provincial trade barriers so that the spectre of duplication and bureaucratization can be jettisoned. Although this strategy may be per-

fectly tailored to the pre-referendum period, it leaves First Nations and Inuit without any certain support or protection.

Outside the national aboriginal community, aboriginal peoples in Quebec have become a convenient rallying force for politically reactionary sentiment. The issue is used by those hostile to Quebec (and to aboriginal peoples also) to frustrate the debate. This only serves to further isolate aboriginal issues and prevent their discussion any sustained or serious way.

The PQ platform contemplates that aboriginal peoples will be treated as "minorities." The secession plan of the PQ tells us "Aboriginal peo-