

in the 1982 constitutional patriation over the objections of not only the Quebec government, under PQ control, but a good many Quebec federalists. In any event, after the last two colossal failures at constitutional revision, the prospects for securing any accommodation of Quebec within the federal system seem exceedingly remote, even if the Chrétien government were prepared to try new approaches.

In effect, on the constitutional front as well, the Chrétien government can offer no more than "business as usual" or, more precisely, the status quo. In the crunch, the status quo might well prevail. Discredited as it may be, a majority of Quebecers may find the status quo preferable to the "adventure" of Quebec sovereignty. Nonetheless, this would be only after a protracted struggle over the "national" question that, like English Canada as a whole, the Chrétien government is ill-prepared to fight and fervently wishes to avoid.

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NATIONAL AFFAIRS

BACK TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL BARRICADES?

by Patrick J. Monahan

With Opposition Leader Lucien Bouchard's defence of Quebec sovereignty highlighting the first week of the new Parliament, media commentators were widely predicting a return to the constitutional barricades. Even as Prime Minister Chrétien reaffirmed that he had been elected to talk about the economy rather than the constitution, pundits questioned how long Chrétien could hold off from uttering the dreaded "c" word.

Indeed, Chrétien himself seemed unable to entirely resist the temptation to begin slugging it out with Bouchard, claiming that the BQ leader's preference for the term "Quebec sovereignty" rather than the harder-edged "separation" displayed weakness and lack of courage. Even Reform party leader Preston Manning got into the act, asking the prime minister whether he was about to be drawn back into the constitutional swamp. Manning's "constitutional swamp" question earned him some media headlines, in contrast to the near silence that had greeted his earlier "constructive criticism" of the throne speech.

It was, as philosopher Yogi Berra would have said, "déjà vu all over again." Judging from the reaction to Bouchard's maiden speech as opposition leader, Canadians seemed on the verge of yet another of the seemingly endless "constitutional rounds" that had so fatigued and

frustrated the country over the past decade.

But, in this case at least, appearances were somewhat deceiving. Contrary to the impression created in the opening days of the new Parliament, there is no reason to believe that Canadians are about to be plunged back into the constitutional camp.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

In one sense, it was difficult to understand what the fuss was all about. Bouchard's defence of Quebec sovereignty was certainly well argued and calmly presented. But the presentation was so low-key that Bouchard barely even hit 5.0 in the political Richter scale. Bouchard's matter-of-fact delivery seemed almost like that of a lawyer arguing "the case for Quebec sovereignty" in front of the judges of the World Court in The Hague, rather than an opposition leader opening a throne speech debate.

"Bouchard supports Quebec Sovereignty" blared the headlines in the English-Canadian newspapers. It was hard to fathom precisely why this solemn declaration was deemed worthy of such wall-to-wall coverage. The BQ's *raison d'être* from the moment of its formation has been the promotion of a sovereign Quebec. We should be surprised that Lucien Bouchard supports Quebec sovereignty?

On the other hand, with the media having now "discovered" that Bouchard isn't totally happy with Canadian federalism, any future speeches by the BQ leader are unlikely to create such shock waves. Bouchard's support for sovereignty, having been well and duly reported, is instantly rendered yesterday's news. Bouchard will have difficulty cracking the front pages again sim-

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ply by declaring that Quebec should be free.

That is not to deny that Bouchard and his 53 BQ seatmates in the Commons will not strive to document the injustices suffered by Quebec at the hands of the rest of Canada. One of the BQ's big complaints so far is that Quebec hockey players are insufficiently represented on the Canadian team competing at the Winter Olympics in Norway. No doubt this alleged discrimination by the hockey coaches (one of whom happens to be a Quebecker himself) is just the thin edge of the wedge. Wait until Bouchard finds out that the Canadian downhill ski team hasn't got a fair proportion of Quebec skiers either!

But these claims for a larger share from the federal pork-barrel are not only tiresome, they are also prone to backfire. Every time Bouchard complains that Quebec has been shortchanged, he runs the risk of someone demonstrating that he has his facts wrong, or that Quebec's shortfall in one area was more than made up by the benefits it received in another.

DON'T CHANGE THE CHANNEL

The throne speech signalled that the government is sticking to its strategy of keeping the agenda focused on the economy and on jobs. There is certainly going to be enough to talk about on the economic front, beginning with Finance Minister Paul Martin's first budget in February.

The February budget will be the first major political hurdle for the new Chrétien government. It will provide the opposition with its first big opening to inflict some damage, particularly if Martin follows through on some of his early trial balloons and initiates any major tax increases. If Bouchard persists in

blathering on about sovereignty in the midst of the budget debate, he risks marginalizing the BQ and leaving the opposition field wide open for Manning's Reformers.

The only way that Bouchard might deflect attention back onto the sovereignty debate is if the government falls into the trap of appearing to muzzle the opposition leader. This might be the result, for example, if the government continues to question Bouchard's right to raise the sovereignty issue in the House of Commons. Foreign Minister

"Whether or not the constitutional issue reasserts itself on the national political agenda in 1994 appears to depend more on events in Quebec City than on those in Ottawa."

André Ouellet trotted out this line of argument in response to Bouchard's opening speech in the Commons.

The principal immediate effect of Ouellet's argument was to permit an indignant Bouchard to garner yet another day's worth of headlines denouncing the anti-democratic tendencies of the government. For Ouellet and the rest of the Liberal Cabinet, a far more effective tactic would be to instruct Bouchard that he is to talk about nothing but Quebec sovereignty in every Commons speech. This would produce instant boredom among the national press gallery, and guarantee that Bouchard's interventions would be ignored. As someone once said, if a tree falls in the forest, but there is no one who hears it, who is to say that the tree fell at all?

QUEBEC ELECTION KEY TURNING POINT

Whether or not the constitutional issue reasserts itself on the national political agenda in 1994 appears to

depend more on events in Quebec City than on those in Ottawa.

With a provincial election due by the fall, the Liberals under new Premier Daniel Johnson are facing an uphill battle against the Parti québécois. Every indication is that the 1994 Quebec election may turn out to be a replay of the 1976 campaign. That election saw an unpopular two-term government being turfed out of office by an opposition offering more effective government and promising that the sovereignty issue would be decided in a later referendum.

The big trump card for the PQ is that they can assure Quebeckers that a vote for them isn't necessarily a vote for sovereignty. They can also paint Daniel Johnson's Liberals as the defenders of the "status quo" — secure in the knowledge that every Quebec premier elected in the past 30 years has promised to obtain "new powers" for the province of Quebec.

One small word of advice for Daniel Johnson: don't schedule the election for November 15, 1994. That just happens to be the 18th anniversary of René Lévesque's 1976 electoral triumph over Robert Bourassa. When you're facing odds like Johnson's, you should at least try and make sure fate is on your side.

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