"Yes" to Senate Reform, But "No" to This Version

The second possibility may be that many western Canadians saw Senate reform as a highly salient issue, but rejected the specific reform model embedded in the Charlottetown Accord. As I suggested in a previous column (see 1 *Canada Watch* 22, elements of the Charlottetown package were problematic for supporters of Senate reform and, therefore, one could believe strongly in Senate reform and still vote "no." Again, however, media coverage and the public debate do not suggest that negative assessments per se played a major role in the west's rejection of the Charlottetown Accord. Although the Senate package certainly came under critical attack, the attack did not go unchallenged and was not central to the broader referendum debate.

"Yes" to Senate Reform, But Not at Any Price

The third possibility may be that western Canadians were relatively pleased with the Senate reform package, but disliked other aspects of the Accord so much that they were prepared to sacrifice Senate reform. Of the three possibilities, this one strikes me as the most likely. Certainly, other aspects of the Accord, and particularly the 25 percent seat guarantee for Quebec, overshadowed the specifics of the Senate reform in the public debate.

Of course, the three explanations are complementary. If Senate reform had been more salient, then western Canadians may have been prepared to swallow other aspects of the Accord. If the Senate package had been stronger, they might also have been prepared to do so. In any event, they did not, and it appears at first glance that Senate reform has been swept from the nation's political agenda along with most of the other elements in the Charlottetown Accord.

The Future of Senate Reform?

And yet, it would be premature to conclude that Senate reform has disappeared. Admittedly, it is unlikely that the west has enough political muscle, or even enough interest, to resuscitate a national debate on Senate reform. It is difficult to imagine any enthusiasm among western premiers, and particularly Mike Harcourt, for a renewed constitutional debate. Nor do I underestimate the antipathy of Quebec to the Charlottetown Senate package and, indeed, to any Senate reform package.

However, the Senate reformers have a critically important card to play and that is the fact that the existing Senate—unelected, unequal, but with formidable formal powers—still exists. To take one of the best lines from the October 26 media coverage, the quo has no status and the existing Senate will continue to generate pressure for institutional reform.

It is difficult to imagine that we will stumble into the 21st century with the current Senate still in place. The trick will be to find a way to reform the Senate without having to roll reform into a larger constitutional package that would likely suffer the same fate as the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords. More specifically, the challenge will be to find non-constitutional means to reform the Senate and to bring it more into line with the contemporary political culture.

This will not be an easy task, but it need not lie beyond our imaginations and will. It is, however, a task for which leadership must come from the west. Senate reformers elsewhere in the country have been scattered to the winds by the October 26 referendum.

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QUEBEC REPORT

The Referendum and Its Aftermath in Quebec

by Guy Laforest

The October 26 referendum was Quebec's second action of collective self-determination in 12 years. The question was the same throughout the country, but Quebec administered its own referendum with the law and the regulations of the National Assembly. In an important sense, this was a form of special status. For the second time in 12 years, the federal government and the rest of the country endorsed both the self-determination and the special status of Quebec. Whatever happens in the future concerning the relationship of Quebec with Canada, the referendum of 1992 has reinforced, both for us and for international observers, the status of Quebec as an autonomous political community. Quite frankly, that's about the only positive thing I have to say with regard to our recent referendum experience.

For those who can still remember the hopes that were in the air after the demise of the Meech Lake Accord, or during the fall of 1990, when Michel Bélanger and Jean Campeau carried on their shoulders the dignity and the legitimacy of the National Assembly, the present situation is very disappointing indeed. Quebeckers have said "no" to the Ottawa-Charlottetown Accord, but they are still stuck with the constitution that Pierre Trudeau and nine English-speaking premiers imposed on them 10 years ago and all this, in a sense, because Robert Bourassa and his government refused the more radical options recommended to them by most sectors of Quebec society.

Unanswered Questions

There is something more intriguing than the Wilhelmy-Tremblay Affair and the documents leaked to Jean-François Lisée and *L'Actualité*. In June 1992, Mr. Bourassa knew through a number of polls that Quebeckers would have voted massively (65 to 70 percent) to support his "Brussels model"—the creation of two sovereign states associated in an economic union. After such a referendum, the Quebec government would have entered into negotiations with the other governments; if the negotiations had failed, Quebec could have proclaimed its independence unilaterally one year following the date of the referendum.

"Quebeckers have said 'no' to the Ottawa-Charlottetown Accord, but they are still stuck with the constitution that Pierre Trudeau and nine English-speaking premiers imposed on them 10 years ago and all this, in a sense, because Robert Bourassa and his government refused the more radical options recommended to them by most sectors of Quebec society."

Instead of choosing that route, Mr. Bourassa, at some point after the July 7 agreement in Ottawa, decided to return to the multilateral table and ultimately to accept a project that he had to know (this is my hypothesis) the people of Quebec would reject. Mr. Bourassa tells us that he had no choice because the leaders of the other provinces manifested no interest for his Brussels scenario, reacting to this with the subtlety of Jeffrey Simpson. I fail to be convinced by this argument. We need a good investigative reporter to shed some light on what happened this summer in the entourage of Premier Bourassa.

The Future of the Liberal Party

Meanwhile, the consequences of Mr. Bourassa's decision are becoming more and more obvious everyday. The Liberal party will become the voice of the unconditional federalists. Michel Pagé, former minister of national education, started flirting with sovereignty association barely one week after having left the Bourassa cabinet. I doubt that Jean Allaire and Mario Dumont will be either allowed or willing to rejoin the ranks of the Liberal party. Rumours of a third party are starting to emerge with the names of Pierre-Marc Johnson and Claude Béland on the lips of most analysts. After the failure of Meech Lake, Mr. Bourassa pronounced his greatest speech as a statesman. Quebec would remain forever a distinct society, he said memorably at the National Assembly, free to choose its destiny. Many people who trusted him and the tone of his speech on that day feel that they have been used in one of Mr. Bourassa's favourite games—playing for political time. They are not likely to forget.

The Sovereignty Option

The referendum of October 26 was not a triumph for sovereigntists in Quebec. The result was closer than it looks on the surface, at 56 to 44 percent. Two hundred and fifty thousand voters made the difference. With polls telling observers that about 20 percent of card-carrying members of the Liberal party intended to vote "no," one has to conclude that the Allaire-Dumont tandem made the difference. Moreover, this can be said while discounting the albeit marginal effect in Quebec of Pierre Trudeau's pronouncements. With Jacques Parizeau at the helm, despite his unique qualities and the sacrifices he has made over the past few years, the Parti Québécois and the idea of sovereignty will not go beyond 45 percent. The problem is not only with the leadership. The Parti Québécois has still to make a clear choice between the forces of "intégrisme national," represented for instance by Jean Dorion and the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal, and the forces coalescing around the idea of a pluralist distinct society.

In the next few years, while the federal party system undergoes a process of fragmentation, Quebec is likely to turn inward and outward. Inward, toward the establishment of a new social contract between majority and minorities, between the various nations forming Quebec society. Outward, to obtain internationally the kind of recognition that remains elusive in Canadian public affairs.

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Quebec Report is a regular feature of Canada Watch.