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NOW WHAT?

I consider Québec's separation from the rest of Canada in the near future to be both a right of the Québec people and a strong possibility. By a combination of blunder and design, Canada's political leaders have generated a destructive momentum which, if not soon arrested or re-directed, will carry the country to the point of disintegration. I think disintegration would be unfortunate for both Québécois and non-Québécois, though not a total disaster for either group. It is still possible, in my opinion, to avoid separation, but not unless decisive steps are taken soon. The establishment of legislative committees, Royal Commissions, governmental task forces, or even "constituent assemblies", do not, in my view, constitute decisive steps in this direction; responsible politicians must meet behind closed doors and negotiate (more intelligently than they did at Meech Lake) until they reach an agreement they can take to their respective legislatures (and perhaps their voters) for approval. Agreement will be unlikely unless leaders outside Québec are willing to recognize a greater degree of constitutional distinctiveness for Québec than ever before. Although any attempt at this point to carry out more extensive constitutional reform than the immediate crisis dictates would generally be foolhardy, the inclusion of a provision concerning aboriginal self-government in the amendment package seems unavoidable, given the circumstances under which the Meech Lake Accord expired.

Technically speaking, Québec could not secede unilaterally from Confederation. The Constitution Act requires a formal constitutional amendment with the participation of other governments, federal and provincial. But such legalities mean little. Every population inhabiting a well-defined geographic area that is reasonably capable of independent political existence has the now well-recognized right of self-determination, provided that it exercises that right by democratic means. In my opinion, this principle applies to the people of Québec. It might also apply, of course, to certain regions within Québec, such as the island of Montreal, or areas in the north that are inhabited chiefly by aboriginal populations.

Why would Québec separation be unfortunate? Because it would hasten Canada's integration with the United States, economically, culturally and politically. The Free Trade Agreement already exerts a powerful assimilative force, which would be greatly magnified by separation. For Franco-Québec it is difficult to understand how even the current level of French in advertising, education, and so on, could be maintained for long without the protective buffer provided by the rest of the country. We would all survive somehow; we might even prosper economically. But the quiet, caring, culturally aware, environmentally sensitive nation we've tried to build since winning our autonomy

from Britain is almost certain to disappear when we surrender that autonomy to the United States. So would the only viable French culture in North America.

There are some who believe that the easiest solution would be a clean break by Québec. The establishment of total sovereignty would be followed, they say, by a negotiated new association that might end up looking much like the negotiated special status within Confederation discussed above. I agree that this might occur, and that if it did occur it would probably be healthy from the point of view of healing wounded pride. I fear such a solution, however, because I think that negotiations are much more likely to succeed if conducted under the imperative of attempting to keep an existing country together than if carried out between separate entities which both have stronger reasons to be concerned about their relations with the United States than with each other. The Canadian Constitution stands in need of amendment in many respects other than those which affect Québec's distinctive concerns. There is a temptation, while politicians are dealing with amendments to meet the Québec crisis, to slip other amendment proposals onto the table as well. With one exception, I think that this would be madness; by unduly complicating and prolonging the bargaining process, it would ensure failure.

The exception concerns aboriginal self-government. Although not logically linked to the Québec situation (except in the important sense that the aboriginal people consider themselves, as "founding peoples" along with the English and French, to be entitled to as much priority in the constitutional recognition of their "distinct society" as either of the others), this question has received so much attention from both media and politicians, and was so closely linked to the failure of the Meech proposals, that it will inevitably be included in any "Son of Meech" amendment package. The slipperiness of the aboriginal self-government notion is such, however, that I doubt whether anything other than a vague statement of principle can be worked out before the final deadline in the Québec crisis arrives. Canada no longer has time for anger. Whatever other Canadians may think, Québécois have both the moral right and the practical ability to be independent.

Québec's sovereignty is not within the gift of the rest of Canada; if Québec opts democratically for independence it will have it. If the rest of Canada wishes to forestall that event, it can do so only through cool negotiation; neither rhetoric nor righteous indignation will help. Success in such negotiations will only be bought at significant cost to Canadians outside Québec. Failure, in my estimation, will involve even greater cost, both inside and outside Québec.