

TOWARDS THE REFERENDUM: CAMPAIGN CONTRADICTIONS

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"The evolving status quo": that Prime Minister Chrétien was reduced to such desperate word play shows the extent to which Québecers expect the Canadian federation to change, at the same time that other Canadians want nothing to do with constitutional negotiations.

The National Commission on the Future of Québec claimed that the "almost unanimous rejection of the status quo" was a "highlight" of their public consultation among Québecers.¹ The process of self-selection involved in making submissions to the Commission and the boycott by the Parti libéral du Québec (PLQ) and many federalists may have left some doubt as to the representativity of its findings, but recent public opinion polls confirm that a signifi-

cant majority of Québecers, federalists and sovereignists alike, are seeking alternatives to the constitutional status quo.²

Just how much change Québecers want is another question — one not likely to be answerable by the "yes / no" available at referendum time. This is because Québec's population has refused over the years to be convinced by the politicians' claims that sovereignty will be a good thing and that the current situation is a good thing. Hence the stalemate, whereby 40 per cent of Québecers reliably support sovereignty, 40 per cent reliably support federalism, and 20 per cent need to be won over — a task, so far, at which the federalists have been the much more successful.

TABLE 1

Discursive Claims on The Referendum and Its Consequences

	The "yes" forces	The "no" forces
Isolation	In the federation, English Canada generally gangs up on Québec, refusing to recognize its distinctiveness. This will continue with a "no" vote.	If Québecers vote "yes" they should not expect a partnership of any kind with Canada: Québec would be on its own.
Solidarity	Canada's self-interest will demand a close political-economic partnership with a sovereign Québec, building on a solidarity that is undermined under federalism.	Accommodation of differences is ongoing in the current federation, through a variety of mechanisms. Thus, not only Québecers are looking for renewed federalism, and they are getting it.

There is an interesting symmetry in the ways both sides attempt to retain and gain support: their strategies formulate discursive claims whose focus is the dichotomy isolation/solidarity (See Table 1). We try, in this paper, to outline the main elements of these discursive strategies, highlighting the internal difficulties each side encounters as the referendum approaches.

THE SOVEREIGNIST ALLIANCE

Although the federalist forces have hardly ever lost the upper hand in their thirty-year struggle with Québec's independence movement,³ it ought to be clear that so long as the options remain defined as independence vs. (roughly) *status quo*, a decisive victory will elude both sides: it is easy to imagine the conflict going on forever, with the Parti Québécois (PQ) and the Parti libéral du Québec (PLQ) as inevitable standard bearers well into the next century.

The emergence of the Bloc Québécois (BQ) and Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), followed by their alliance with the PQ, opens the door to another possibility, probably not for this time, but perhaps for the post-referendum era: the redefinition of the options as neither federalism nor sovereignty but rather "a true confederation" — this, a phrase increasingly popular among prominent Québécois eager to find a nationalist, if moderate, compromise.⁴ Although the BQ and the ADQ have risen from opposite ends of the sovereignist/federalist spectrum, they have quickly found common ground through a pragmatism that still eludes the PLQ and Jacques Parizeau's PQ. Thus, if the text of the agreement between the PQ, BQ and ADQ begins with an affirmation of the sovereignist project, it is quickly modified by a battery of associationist clauses obliging the Québec government to seek a thoroughgoing treaty with Canada.

Many observers have seen this agreement as calling for "sovereignty for sure, association maybe,"⁵ amounting to a hard-line sovereignist sleight of hand. What is missing from this appreciation, though, is a realization that the sovereignist alliance is anything but united in its strategy for the referendum: while Jacques Parizeau is officially the leader of the "yes" forces, his two partners have consistently challenged his vision of what the referendum should involve. Thus, the somewhat unexpected tandem of Lucien Bouchard and Mario Dumont has been trying to steer the sovereignist ship away from Parizeau's

hard line, guided by the notion that the referendum must be won — and that therefore the sovereignist forces must meet the population on its own ground. The alliance agreement's heavy emphasis on the hoped-for partnership with Canada is a direct outcome of the Bouchard-Dumont influence. Indeed, if meeting the population on its own ground means abandoning the sovereignty/federalism dualism, so be it: the Bouchard-Dumont "yes" forces will offer Québécois the confederal partnership that Robert Bourassa dreamed of but never dared to pursue.

The move away from the sovereignist/federalist dichotomy and toward a consensus on confederation is, however, actively resisted by Premier Parizeau and his backers. This can be seen in the September 6th ceremony at Québec City's Grand Théâtre, when the preamble to the sovereignty bill was unveiled. The three-page long text is almost entirely devoted to a call to sovereignty, with only one sentence at the end alluding to "new relations" with the Canadian people, that would "allow us to maintain our economic ties and to redefine our political exchanges."⁶ Presented as a highly solemn event, the ceremony was attended by nearly one thousand sovereignists — but by neither Lucien Bouchard nor Mario Dumont. Both were in Montreal, participating in pre-campaign events, and claiming not to be needed in Québec City. Although both also denied any tensions or disagreements within the sovereignist alliance, a Dumont aide was paraphrased in Montreal's *The Gazette* as saying: "Dumont was not involved in writing the preamble because he didn't approve of Parizeau's original plan for unconditional separation."⁷

Despite the alliance's agreement on the centrality of the partnership with Canada, the preamble's final text still expresses Parizeau's initial strategy — and its unveiling can be seen as a bid by the hard-liners against their alliance partners to redefine the terms of the referendum debate toward a more straightforward sovereignty, and to reclaim for Parizeau the leadership of the "yes" forces. No wonder Bouchard and, especially, Dumont found something else to do.

In this sense, the phrase "sovereignist alliance" is something of a misnomer. What does unite the alliance, however, is a sense that Québec is isolated and threatened in the federation as it is currently structured. Two sets of key historical moments are generally invoked to document this claim: the *Constitution Act, 1982*, and the failed Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional accords. The patriation

of the constitution with an amending formula and a charter of rights and freedoms, absent the consent of the Government of Québec, amounted to the proverbial stab in the back. The 1982 deal "curtailed Québec's powers" and "derogated from its vital interests," wrote the Bélanger-Campeau Commission.⁸ According to Allaire, "Québec was excluded from the most important constitutional amendment in the history of Canadian federalism. It was isolated within the federal pact."⁹ The Report of the National Commission on the Future of Québec has, more recently, confirmed the 1982 constitutional deal as the definitive constitutional moment as concerns Québec-Canada relations.¹⁰ The recently released *Déclaration de souveraineté* concurs, and adds:

We were hoodwinked in 1982 when the Governments of Canada and the English-speaking provinces made changes to the Constitution, in depth and to our detriment, in defiance of the categorical opposition of our National Assembly. Twice since then attempts were made to right that wrong. The failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990 confirmed a refusal to recognize even our distinct character. And in 1992 the rejection of the Charlottetown Accord by both Canadians and Quebecers confirmed the conclusion that no redress was possible.

On this much, the three alliance partners unproblematically agree. But, as Lise Bissonnette, editor of *Le Devoir*, has noted (echoing Daniel Johnson) about the whole of the preamble, "il n'y a pas de lien absolu, univoque, entre le texte et sa conclusion qui se lit: 'Le Québec est un pays souverain.'"¹¹

The referendum question, announced the next day, confirmed the ascendancy of the hard-liners: a "yes" would allow the Québec government to declare sovereignty after merely submitting a partnership proposal to Canada. Interviewed on Radio-Canada's *Le Point* (September 10) a few days after the question was announced, Premier Parizeau noted that a number of possibilities existed regarding the timing of the proclamation of sovereignty. But he insisted that, in any case, a "yes" outcome in the referendum would make sovereignty a certainty, no matter what happened to partnership negotiations with Canada. Québec, he said, will be "virtually sovereign" as soon as the "yes" result becomes official.

The interview had begun with Mr. Parizeau admitting that he liked this question a whole lot more than that of 1980, and explaining with a smile that he was more influential in writing this one. Indeed, this question, accompanied by the preamble, shows how unequal the alliance was, and how being the Premier made all the difference for Jacques Parizeau. Although the dynamic of the alliance and entrenched public opinion marginalized the hard line through 1994 and the first half of 1995, Premier Parizeau eventually has been able to push aside his partners and their moderate preferences — making it all the more likely that the population's answer to the referendum question would be "no."

THE FEDERALIST FORCES

If the strategy of the sovereignist alliance tends to aim at generating feelings of isolation while at the same time reducing to a minimum Québecers' fear of "yes," the PLQ strategy is to reduce isolative tendencies and to, instead, engender a sense of solidarity with the rest of Canada. At the same time, the strategy is to portray the sovereignty option as out of touch with Québec's historical demands and contemporary public opinion. The "no" forces have, however, problems of their own which parallel the jockeying for position among sovereignist leaders, their outlooks and backers.

Daniel Johnson, leader of the PLQ, the official opposition, and the official "no" camp, has continually reiterated, as has Jean Chretien, a strategy of discussing only the proposal for sovereignty and not his own or his party's vision of constitutional change. That is, no alternatives to the sovereignist proposal will be offered by the PLQ and the "no" camp. Johnson is vulnerable to the charge that he is "empty" of ideas which could serve as alternatives to sovereignty.¹² This absence of an alternative constitutional vision is compounded by Johnson's failure to have clearly articulated in the past any other constitutional option he feels comfortable supporting other than the *status quo*.

To the considerable extent that public opinion in Québec is against the present constitutional arrangements, the PLQ could be courting potential disaster if it were to run a campaign on that basis. Thus, under pressure from federalists within Québec, particularly from his party's youth wing, Johnson recently announced his support for the PLQ's traditional demands for Québec's distinctiveness; "prin-

ciples that have always inspired the thinking and action of our party, notably in ... the Meech Lake accord."¹³ The objective is to place Johnson clearly within the mainstream of nationalist opinion, although his vague and minimalist option appears to deviate from past precedent.

Even if Johnson was prepared to endorse a specific program for constitutional reform, the credibility of that program would be severely undermined by the disinclination of the Prime Minister and Premiers outside of Québec to engage in anything resembling constitutional talks in order to appease public opinion within Québec. Reform of the federation in the guise of administrative change, as in the Internal Trade Agreement signed in July 1994, is considered less risky and less controversial. This disinclination is understandable from a number of vantage points. According to the usual refrain, Canadians are weary of the incessant preoccupation with constitutional talk, commencing in 1986 with the signing of the Meech Lake Accord. Provincial and federal politicians also have an incentive to steer clear of the constitutional dossier. Many of the Premiers who actively participated in those rounds of constitutional talks, the Premiers of New Brunswick and Saskatchewan notwithstanding, have not fared well in seeking renewed mandates. Premier Mike Harcourt of British Columbia, who will go to the polls shortly, has been damaged perhaps irreparably by his apparent "weakness" in consenting to a 25 per cent floor in the percentage of Québec seats in the House of Commons. In other words, no Premier who wishes to seek a renewed mandate should want to talk seriously about constitutional reform.

Still, given the possibility of a "yes" victory, would active assistance from federalist forces outside of Québec be useful to Johnson and Chrétien? That assistance could likely take two forms, alternatively or concurrently: supporting renewed federalism and indicating that there will be no negotiations regarding the terms of sovereignty or association. The first of these would affirm an existing solidarity with Québec, while the second would threaten the isolation of a sovereign Québec.

HELP FROM OUTSIDE QUÉBEC

In apparent response to Johnson's speech to the PLQ youth wing, Prime Minister Chrétien appeared to lend a helping hand to the "no" forces when he suggested that constitutional talks would have to be

renewed, in any event, by 1997.¹⁴ This was because Part V of the *Constitution Act, 1982* requires that the First Ministers meet within fifteen years of its coming into force in order to revisit the amending formula. The 1997 talks provide the Prime Minister with the opening he needs to both court the Québec electorate looking for alternatives to sovereignty and the *status quo*, while remaining faithful to his electoral commitment not to (voluntarily) renew constitutional talks — after all, the constitution makes him do it. This hardly represents a profound commitment to change.

Also, as the referendum concerns the future of Canada — including future Canadian linkages with Aboriginal peoples from within Québec and the sense of proprietorship many outside of Québec feel in the continued maintenance of the federation — it seems only right that the Premiers and other public opinion leaders impart to Québécois their sentiments in advance of the referendum vote. Not only does it seem appropriate, many Premiers would consider it their duty to do so, referring to the constitutional amending formula and to the state of public opinion in their home province. After all, Québécois seemingly did the same by offering to the rest of Canada Québec's constitutional demands in the wake of Meech Lake. But no elaborate mechanisms for consultation are being instituted and none likely are forthcoming, if at all, without a "yes" outcome. Any provincial or Canada-wide consultation regarding a potential sovereignist victory would be perceived as dangerously divisive, potentially inflaming public opinion within Canada and fuelling sovereignty within Québec.

There are those political leaders from outside of Québec (including the Prime Minister) who take another approach which may be perceived as assisting the "no" forces in Québec. These first ministers chide the sovereignty project and outrightly refuse to ponder a post-Canada Québec, or any negotiations in association with it. They may be pandering to public opinion at home, or hoping to influence the referendum outcome, or both.

Are these suitable roles for the Premiers to play during the referendum campaign? A number of factors militate against it. As the desired federalist outcome in the referendum campaign is a "no" vote, any intervention in the debate runs the risk of back-firing. This is made plain by the dissonance in constitutional rhetoric which prevailed during both the Meech and Charlottetown debates. When B.C. Justice Minister Moe Sihota claimed that Québec Premier

Bourassa "lost" on the distinct society issue in the Charlottetown text, this was meant to score points for his home audience in B.C.; not surprisingly, it had the opposite effect in Québec.¹⁵ Any attempt by Canadians outside of Québec at influencing the outcome of the referendum campaign by negatively portraying the sovereignty option surely runs the risk of literally speaking the wrong language. There is, then, little that the rest of Canada can talk about with Québécois other than to invoke pious platitudes about our common history and the strength in diversity. This is reminiscent of the solidarity felt between Canada and Québec the morning after the Charlottetown vote.

The far more significant lesson to be drawn is that the deep cleavages between the constitutional visions of Québec and those outside of it are perhaps too profound to be overcome, at least at any time in the foreseeable future. The dissonance between Canada and Québec over such issues as the equality of the provinces and Québec's distinctiveness, as represented in public opinion polls following the Charlottetown referendum, suggests that in terms of constitutional reform there is little that can realistically be talked about.¹⁶ The symbolic purchase of each proposal has an opposing, negative effect in the other jurisdiction. This is more than a hermeneutic problem that can be overcome by more elite dialogue and precise legal drafting. Indeed, in this sense, no matter the amount of administrative decentralization prompted by the current drive to reduce the federal deficit, it is hard not to conclude that Québec is isolated in its conception of the country, which remains best summarized as a pact between two nations.

The most optimal strategy for federalists outside Québec may be to stay out of the game, assuming they only concern themselves with the short term — that is, obtaining a "no" at referendum time. Given the recent statements of the Premiers at their annual conference, this strategy seems unlikely — although the controversy between Premier Parizeau and the others over who said what behind closed doors, petered out surprisingly quickly. Federalist participation raises not only the referendum stakes, but the post-referendum stakes whatever its outcome. Suggestions of future change together with refusals to negotiate send ambivalent signals to the Québec electorate and box-in future governments. Moreover, these are subjects that, if broached with any degree of serious intent, more properly belong in the realm of our recently well-rehearsed and potentially incendiary processes for public consultation. This is also the

case for those outside Québec who might concern themselves for the longer term, and who may want to borrow a leaf from that part of the sovereigntist alliance which seeks to redefine the terms of debate away from sovereignty *and* federalism.

TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY

Symmetry is again the key word when thinking about what happens after the referendum: the reactions to and consequences of a "yes" are easier to predict for Québec than for English Canada, and the reverse is true of a "no" vote.

"No" remains Québécois' likely answer to the referendum question, notwithstanding the slight surge in public opinion favouring the "yes" in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the question.¹⁷ Indeed, the only way the sovereigntists can win is with the help of a massive blunder on the part of "no" forces and/or if the "yes" is redefined in a confederationist way. Both are highly unlikely at this point: the blunder, because political leaders outside Québec appear to have understood that keeping quiet is the most useful contribution they can make; the confederationist redefinition of "yes," because of the now released preamble, question and enabling legislation.¹⁸

In the event of a "no," there is little doubt that Canadians outside Québec would immediately seek to return to business as usual: no constitutional discussions beyond the obligatory 1997 First Ministers' Conference, which would be kept as unobtrusive and inconsequential as possible. As happened in the short period between the 1980-2 constitutional renewal and the 1986 Meech Lake Accord, the "Québec problem" will be expected to recede into the very back of the country's collective mind. Thus, English Canada will treat a "no" as entirely unproblematic, a non-event as it were — we can go on as if nothing happened. As in 1980, however, Québécois are not likely to think that a "no" is the end of the story. While they may not expect constitutional discussions on renewed federalism to start in the immediate future, they remain dissatisfied with their place in the country and will want to see some evidence that Canada is moving in directions that they find congenial.

As for the political forces involved in the referendum campaign, a "no" is likely to inaugurate another period of "morosity," as well as a reconfiguration of political power. Trying to map this kind of

outcome is rather risky, but it is not unreasonable to expect both the PQ and the PLQ to suffer: we will see the end of this generation's hard-line sovereignist project, to a degree much greater than the post-1980 referendum, when Jacques Parizeau, Camille Laurin and others held on to their dream. And the PLQ will be a rather pitiful winner, being too federalist for a good majority of Québécois, on legs made wobbly by its weak-hearted and unrealistic appeals to Meech-type renewed federalism, and with an unpopular leader. The field, then, will be open for pragmatists and moderates such as Bouchard and Dumont to capture a wide "confederationist" mainstream. What happens then is anybody's guess, but it won't be the end of Canada's "Québec problem."

In the unlikely event that Québécois would vote "yes," there is little question that a confederationist consensus will emerge. After people calm down from the big federalist blunder that will have pushed the sovereignists over the top, or following a moderate "yes" campaign, the agenda in Québec will be concerned with a search for the strongest possible association with Canada — unless and until, that is, Canadians react negatively and try to undermine the realization of sovereignty. Québécois are likely to be radicalized if, for instance, they get the impression that Canadians are being mean-spirited, not only about the terms of economic association but also about things like borders and relations with First Nations. A "hard" sovereignty could then become the option of choice for a good majority of Québécois.

Which raises the question of how the rest of Canada would react to a "yes" vote. Predictions range from acrimonious break-up to rational negotiations driven by a common economic self-interest — variations on the dichotomy isolation/solidarity. Patrick Monahan, for instance, predicts that a unilateral declaration of independence, outside of the amending formula, would provoke Canada into a resentful and hard-line bargaining position.¹⁹ Gordon Gibson, on the other hand, considers the amending formula question irrelevant. Because of the rational self-interest each side has in its continued economic stability, the expediency of maintaining business confidence would drive each side quickly to reasonable bargaining positions. As Gibson writes: "Business will demand fast action."²⁰ Both views suggest, correctly, that reactions to a "yes" in English Canada will not be monolithic. Rather, an illegal UDI will provoke hostility, just as economic interests will seek to instill calm. To the extent that the latter interests

prevail, the "yes" becomes less significant an outcome.

The very legitimacy of the Canadian Parliament in a post-referendum Canada, of course, also hangs in the balance. As Alan Cairns astutely observes, English Canada exists, if at all, as a sociological and not as an organized political entity.²¹ To the delight of the economic right, as represented by Gordon Gibson, the provinces would emerge as the most powerful figures at any bargaining table. This scenario foresees negotiations leading to the radical decentralization of a post-Quebec Canada. Such an outcome would be harmonious with that segment of Quebec public opinion seeking a confederationist solution to the problem of Quebec in Canada.

Nor is there reason to be sanguine about the continued existence of a post-Quebec Canada. Centrifugal forces could make remaining political linkages redundant, particularly at a time when perceived fiscal pressures are unravelling the social welfare state and open borders for business firms are realigning trade flows. The post-"yes" state of affairs in what remains of Canada might resemble nothing like pre-referendum arrangements. In which case, not only would the confederationist solution emerge as a viable option but a particular economic agenda would have gained immeasurably by the outcome. □

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Endnotes

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2. Hugh Winsor, "Quebeckers Want Proposals From Ottawa" *The Globe & Mail* (26 August 1995) A1.
3. The immediate aftermath of the Meech Lake Accord's failure is one exception, when polls reported that as many as 70 per cent of Québécois favoured sovereignty. See Édouard Cloutier, Jean H. Guay, and Daniel Latouche, *Le Virage* (Montréal: Québec/Amérique, 1992) at 66.
4. See for instance several contributions to the special issue of the business magazine *Entreprendre* (8:4,

August / September 1995) on the topic "Mon pays." For this special issue, 60 "sages" (wise men and women) were consulted on what they consider their country and how they approach the referendum. Among others who use the phrase "une véritable confédération": Georges-Henri Lévesque, Jean Allaire, Nycol Pageau-Goyette, Michel Bélanger, Bernard Lamarre, Jeannine-Guillevin-Wood, all but the first two of whom are business people.

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January 1995). Adding fuel to that fire, the Québec Superior Court has ruled that a declaration of sovereignty outside of the amending formula would constitute a "grave threat to the rights and liberties required to be guaranteed by the Charter" (our translation). See *Bertrand c. Québec (Procureur general)*, [1995] A.Q. no. 644 (QL), para. 81.

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