AFTER 30 OCTOBER 1995

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These last weeks have been ones of anguish and anxiety, of indecision and hard thought, of much pain and little hope.

As an anglophone Québécoise I had assumed that I would simply swallow my doubts and vote *Non*. Yet, as the date drew closer and the gap between the two camps narrowed, it became increasingly — and painfully — obvious that I would not be permitted to make any simple decision.

I was one of the large group of *indécis*, switching from side to side, hour by hour. In a single day — Friday the 27th — I was convinced by an Anglophone leftist to vote *Oui* and a francophone ecologist to vote *Non*, all before noon. Then, that afternoon along with so many other law-abiding Québec citizens, I experienced an absolute horror at the wanton interference of the "crusade for Canada" and the lack of respect for the basic democratic principles of electoral law.

Behind all of this uncertainty, of course, was the requirement that I make a choice between two identities. Many others in Québec faced equally terrible choices. Of course there were splits in families and among co-workers. But even more dramatic were the many *individuals* who were divided, themselves ripped in two. These were the thousands of citizens incapable of deciding until the last minute, convinced the instant after marking their ballot that they should have done the opposite, who voted *Oui* and cheered for a "petit *Non*" (or vice versa); those rational actors who made "symbolic gestures" which they could not defend with rational arguments but took nevertheless.

Then to the horror of so many, on the evening of the 30th, the group of people with very mixed feelings about the referendum ballooned. All those Quebecers — francophone, allophone and anglophone — who believed in a modern, pluralist, and territorial nationalism suddenly came face to face with the old demons.

Because this news has not reached very far beyond the borders of Québec, it is important to revisit the day after the referendum and the reactions of a substantial number of Quebecers who had supported the Yes. That day, instead of being one of jubilation or even careful celebration, was initially one of disbelief and anger. And then there was an explosion of action. For many in Québec the 31st of October 1995 was a day in which the metaphor of disease and healing was immediate, as they worked to excise the cancer from the body politic. Jacques Parizeau had to be forced out. The result was that for many Quebecers the post-referendum clock really only started ticking at 17h30 on the 31st, with the resignation of the Prime Minister, who was forced to go because of the anger of his long-time supporters.

In this story of the referendum there is, in other words, a double identity crisis. There is the conflict of those who see themselves as both Quebecers and Canadian. And, there is the crisis of those who do not recognize themselves in any narrow definition of Québécois nationalism and who anticipate, instead, a future of progressive politics and territorial nationalism. These groups are not separate entities; they cross-cut and intertwine. Any failure to recognize this mixedness is a failure to understand modern Québec.

Therefore, despite being experienced by individuals as an identity crisis, this was never a personal problem; it was and remains profoundly political.

The first task for the post-referendum weeks and months involves, then, creating a viable political vehicle that does not force this impossible choice next time. Next time a better choice must be on the table.

How might it be done? A first step is to set out some first principles and then to look for a practical project which can allow them to be realized. I will begin by describing the first principles. Then I suggest what I consider to be a viable political project which might allow them to be better manifested.

One first principle is that Canada is a country which shares a territory with Aboriginal peoples whose claims are prior, national, and urgent. Within this country, there are different national identities and these have given rise to several nationalisms. The basic claims of these movements must be met if any meaningful sharing of territory is to occur. Moreover, neither Aboriginal peoples nor Quebecers will ever accept less than recognition of their status as peoples. Thus, on October 30th the credentialed federalist Claude Ryan could approvingly quote Lucien Bouchard's call for recognition of Québec as a people. Ryan is not alone in the federalist camp in supporting this claim.

For a number of years, Canadians both inside and outside Québec have come to understand and accept the claims of Aboriginal peoples for recognition. Their nationalist movements have made major gains since they were galvanized into action by the need to reject the assimilationist White Paper produced by the Trudeau Liberal government in 1969. They have compelled a major shift in the understandings of themselves and their political projects held by non-Aboriginal communities. Of course, Aboriginal peoples' precise claims for self-government have yet to be met. Nonetheless, the Charlottetown Accord did recognize the inherent right to self-government, and it is unlikely that future agreements will go back on that.

Leaders of Aboriginal groups have done their political work well, and in a few short decades non-Aboriginal Canadians have fundamentally altered the way they conceptualize the political project and claims as well as the identities of Aboriginal peoples. Their success was helped by the *absence* of any legitimate, non-racist alternative discourse. While old-fashioned racism obviously still shapes responses to political claims of Aboriginal peoples, this discourse has little legitimacy. Therefore, Aboriginal groups and their leaders have had space to teach non-Aboriginal communities and politicians to think of them as peoples.

This space has never been available to nationalists in Ouébec. Since the Quiet Revolution they have

been confronted with an alternative discourse and constitutional project. This is one which names them 'Francophones' rather than Quebecers. It considers them residents of a province rather than of their own state. It would make the Québec state no different from any provincial government. To confuse matters further, since the 1960s — with the brief exception of the Clark years — this project has been designed and promoted by persons coming from Québec and claiming to speak in the name of Québec. It is this project which, at least since October 30th, is no longer viable.

The second of my fundamental premises is that Canada is a country in which principles of social solidarity, of equity and, therefore, of social and economic citizenship rights still have widespread popular support, even when the forces of the right and marketization are in the ascendancy.

This too is a matter of identity for Canadian nationalists. The free trade debates exposed for all to see the extent to which Canadian national identity has, at least since World War II, depended on distinguishing "here" from "there" (the USA, that is) via our social programmes and other measures of social solidarity. Limited as the actual programmes may have been, ineffective in overcoming social inequalities as they may be, Canada's commitment to a just and equitable society had been a central part of Canadian national identity for the past half-century. The 1988 "free trade election" could encapsulate "Canadian identity as medicare," defined as an approach to health care which did not exist in the USA. Moreover, given that these programmes are post-1945 constructions, the federal government, as the single government which might speak across provincial diversity, always occupied a privileged place.

These two principles give rise logically, I believe, to the constitutional position which has thus far gone without sufficient recognition.

Even if it began as a joke, I have always believed in the position that Canada will only flourish with "un Québec souverain dans un Canada uni." The other label sometimes used to describe the position is asymmetrical federalism. This position, which I believe is one which can meet the demands of all three nationalist movements — Aboriginal, Québec, Canadian — has thus far been banished from political discourse, because constitutional politics has been confined to another and more costly track.

Long years of "the politics of the constitution" have familiarized us with the incapacity of Canadian political discourse to accept the notion that Québec might be a province different from the others. For the last 30 years, neither the federal government nor the provinces in their intergovernmental manifestations were willing to grant anything to Québec which all provinces might not enjoy. "Ten equal provinces" was the response promoted by the Trudeau (and now Chrétien) Liberals to the demands emanating from Québec of the Quiet Revolution and after. Thus, in the days immediately after the 1995 referendum the provincial Premiers quickly stood up to assert "no special status."

In these same few decades, the Official Languages Act and then the Charter of Rights and Freedoms de-socialized and individualized culture. Citizens became bearers of linguistic rights and differences. All this is familiar — and it gave us not only the exclusion of 1982 and the failure of 1990 but also the complete incapacity of so much of the rest-of-Canada to "get it" in 1995.

The result is that in October 1995 I simply could not recognize myself in the campaign the federalists conducted. The problem is not that the campaign was badly run or organized. The problem is not even that the "crusade for Canada" offered nothing more than conditional love: "we love Québec — as long as you vote *Non*". The problem is not that Clyde Wells confused recognition of language as a cultural pillar with racial and other differences. All of these are highly problematic, of course. They are more than that, however. They are absolutely disastrous, precisely because they signal that the rest-of-Canada just does not get it.

They do not "get" that the vision of Canada offered by a liberal version of individual bilingualism and of fondness for individual Quebecers is too limited. As important and as rewarding as it is that individuals be able to speak both official languages, could the "crusaders" express anything more than the real personal linkages among individuals which exist in Canada? Did they "love" Québec as a society? Could they comprehend that the issue was one of a vision of society? Did they accept that "distinction" had forged a different set of responses and social institutions which were not the same as their own (much as there had been cross-fertilization over time)? Were they willing to acknowledge Hugh Maclennan's concept of two solitudes, as a relationship not of distance but of encounter between two separate entities occupying the same space? Did they have any concept at all of the social?

The last weeks have forced me to recognize (yet again) that the answer to all these questions is No. The last years of Canadian politics have done two things. The politics of Trudeau Liberalism has been devoted to undermining any notion of the societal dimensions of cultural difference. They would reduce us all to being what Clyde Wells would have us, nothing more than individual speakers of "different languages." The logical consequence is then, as he asks us, why recognize one difference over any other?

Of course, there has been some movement in recent weeks towards recognizing Ouébec as a "distinct society." Yet the problem is that the emphasis is all on the "distinct," with no recognition of the "society." There is now finally some acceptance for what is essentially a symbolic move, basically reiterating the position of the Charlottetown Accord. This is the idea that, Québec is culturally, linguistically and legally (as in the civil law) a distinct society. Given the minimalist reading usually attached to this formula, the effective meaning is that Quebecers can speak French, watch television in French, and make marriage contracts. This is far, far less than the notion of the political space necessary to realize our own political projects — our own way of doing industrial policy or designing family policy that most Quebecers mean when we say we are a distinct society.

Once again we might compare the relative ease with which Canadians accept the concept of Aboriginal justice, or development decisions designed and controlled by Aboriginal communities, because their history (bleak as it is and racist as we have been) makes them peoples. The tragedy is that there has been so much resistance in the last decades of Canadian politics to recognizing that Québec is similarly a society which might define its own projects, its own way of being, based on its own history. To return to the impossible couplet, the direction of Canadian politics has been to deny recognition to anything that might smack of a *Québec souverain*, of special status, in the name of "ten equal provinces."

But the tragedy is even greater. The politics of the last years has also made it impossible to sustain a belief in *un Canada uni*. This second half of the famous joke is too often ignored in the debates which focus on constitutional matters. Integral to these discussions are many more issues than the division of powers.

There is a political project of decentralization which is well on its way to completion. As one enthusiast describes it:

The 1995 budget was both message and messenger in this context: a devolution to markets (privatization, contracting out, deregulation) and a devolution to provinces (federal downsizing and the decentralization of the federal envelope).¹

The 1995 Martin budget finally consecrated the abandonment of any vision of realistic and defensible pan-Canadian social and economic standards. This was an economic project masquerading as a "constitutional solution," an economic project which had been developing over the years of Mulroney Conservatism and was continued by the Liberal government after 1993. It has effectively exploded the second term of my preferred political project — un Canada uni n'existe plus.

This is the part of the couplet which so many activists in Québec simply don't "get," however. They do not understand that "national standards" are called "national" because without them Canada does not exist. Even those who are not absolute indépendantistes can't see that Canada must have some form of active central government in order to be, in the case of the other nine provinces, more than a collection of small political entities vulnerable to the entreaties of the south and the vagaries of the world economy. Québec may escape being submerged by such forces precisely because it is already a self-defined society with its own powerful economic, social and cultural institutions, but PEI and Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan and Alberta will not survive.

Since the 1995 Martin budget, and in the absence of real constitutional change, the country can be no more than ten separate entities, each open to the divide and conquer strategies of neo-conservatism. At the very same time, however, in February 1995, the public consultations conducted by the Québec government on the referendum project were turning out a popular demand for a *projet de société*. Hearing after hearing uncovered the profound desire of ordinary Quebecers to inscribe a blueprint for their social future in the constitutional documents being considered. Moreover, the balance of forces in the

referendum campaign generated a statement of such a *projet*, one which shares little with the politics of Mike Harris' Ontario or Ralph Klein's Alberta. Does this mean that the best chance to sustain "Canadian" values is in a separate Québec?

Perhaps. Or, maybe it means that the only position that can sustain a future Canada is a project which simultaneously recognizes the right of Québec (as that of Aboriginal peoples) to self-government and mobilizes against a right-wing neo-conservative agenda which would devolve economic and political power to the market as much as to the provinces.

A vision of asymmetrical federalism - un Ouébec souverain dans un Canada uni — is a viable response to the project of partenariat sought by the Bloc Québécois and Action Démocratique (as well as certain wings of the PQ). Both create two strong entities. Both recognize the historical contribution of Québec and the other provinces (including Saskatchewan led by the CCF/NDP) to the construction of Canada. Both are compromises developed outside the existing, increasingly incapacitated, institutions. Both are equally moderate and middle-ofthe-road, failing to satisfy the desire of indépendantistes for their own country and of the provincial Premiers for "formal equality." Both respond to the desire of many Quebecers to be simultaneously and equally Québécois and Canadian. Both allow Canadians to define themselves as citizens of a successful, bilingual, polyethnic and multinational entity. Both call for negotiations, in good faith and with imagination, of a new future for the new times. And both would make it possible, in 1996 as in 1992, to prevent the Right from embedding its economic and social agenda in the Constitution, in the name of solving the "national question."

There is common ground here. A conversation *might* be held. However, it demands a major *reorientation*, a move away from three decades of constitutional discourse and the tired formulae which will not work. It means abandoning entrenched positions and imagining a different future. If we are not up to doing this, Canada will not exist in a very few years, although a strong Québec probably will.

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Endnotes

 Thomas Courchene, "The Implications of the No Vote" The Globe and Mail (31 October, 1995).