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The Quebec Issue and the Federal Election

In Prologue to Political Instability Ahead, Bitter Fight Over Quebec's Future Roils Federal Election Campaign

Reform Party, Riding Wave of Anti-Quebec Feeling, Now Expected to Form Official Opposition

Majority Liberal Government Still Appears Likely

Bloc Québécois Struggles to Hold Sovereignist Base

PC Leader Charest Experiences Boomlet in La Belle Province; NDP Strong on Prairies

Polarization of Public Opinion on Quebec Begins to Cut Politically—Further Turmoil Looms

It couldn't last forever—that deep denial, that studied avoidance, that contrived official optimism that Canada could somehow muddle through without a national debate on Quebec's future within Canada. Having bottled up the issue for the past 3½ years, the governing Liberals are now paying the price of having it raised in the partisan heat of a federal election campaign rather than at a constitutional conference, where everyone is assumed to be on good behavior.

How high a price will the Liberals pay on election night?

In some ways the Liberals are beneficiaries of the turmoil over Quebec, since they are the only party with a federalist francophone leader and an established base from sea to sea. While they may lose up to a dozen seats in Atlantic Canada and a few elsewhere and no longer seem able to pick up additional seats in the West, their apparent lock on practically all the seats in Ontario, and a shot at picking up seats in Quebec, means

that the Liberal Party should emerge on June 2 with a majority, probably a somewhat reduced majority, in the House of Commons. But the price they will have paid for their inaction on national unity is that it will be considerably more difficult for them to govern Canada after all the campaign bloodletting over Quebec.

"Though Canadians have seen this show many times before," writes Susan Delacourt in the *Globe and Mail*, "they have not seen it during a federal election campaign in at least two decades, and never at this pitch." Delacourt, one of Canada's most astute political observers, concludes, "All the passion and the drama of the campaign is revolving around the age-old obsession of Canadian unity and the question of what to do about Quebec separatism."

So the Liberals should return to Ottawa with a renewed mandate, but if present trends continue, across the floor they will face a resurgent Reform Party as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. This is a prospect the Liberals do not welcome, since the Reformers likely will stage a bitter national unity debate in miniature virtually every day at 2 o'clock during Question Period and on the nightly television news.

Before the Quebec issue exploded in the campaign, the Reform Party seemed to be on the ropes, fading nationally and losing a chunk of its electoral base in Western Canada, especially in British Columbia. Reform leader Preston Manning, who is cordially detested by many in his own party, including ex-

Reformers Steven Harper and Jan Brown, was thought to be on the way out as a force in Canadian politics.

But the sudden emergence of the Quebec issue in an otherwise issue-less campaign revived Reform's sagging fortunes in British Columbia and elsewhere. Soon Manning was challenging the Prime Minister to a "Lincoln-Douglas debate" on national unity. Manning drew parallels between Quebec secession and the American Civil War, raising the specter of "anarchy." Chrétien replied that "we all know Preston Manning is no Abe Lincoln," but Manning had touched a nerve.

With only 50 or so seats, and an array of positions on national issues that seem extremist to most Canadians, the Reformers might not appear that formidable as an Opposition Party. But the Reformers have one issue, resistance to Quebec's constitutional demands, where they undoubtedly reflect majority opinion in English-speaking Canada; and a second issue, restrictions on immigration to Canada of non-whites, which appeals to an angry minority.

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Election, continued

Reform will be a formidable Opposition Party because in the adversarial dynamic of parliamentary exchange, Manning is like a dog with a bone when he pounces on the Quebec issue. The Liberals fear and loathe Manning when he rises to ask the Prime Minister why Quebec should not be permitted to leave Canada if the PQ win "fifty-percent-plus-one" in a future referendum on sovereignty. Privately many Liberal MPs believe that Manning's hidden agenda is to facilitate Quebec's exit from Canada. This may be unfair, but as Opposition Leader Manning will have vast opportunities to "frame" the national-unity debate in a way calculated to put the governing Liberals on the defensive and decrease their margin for maneuver and compromise.

Besides having to face Reformers as their Opposition, another negative consequence for the governing Liberals of the emergence of national unity as a campaign issue is to dramatize the explosiveness of Quebec politics—and the fragility of Quebec's lingering commitment to Canada.

Canadian journalists have been scrambling to keep on top of events. As the campaign heads into its final phase, the Canadian media are talking about the poor campaign waged by the Bloc Québécois, and polls that, for a time, showed the separatist Bloc and the federalist Liberals running neck-and-neck even in the sovereigntist stronghold of the Saguenay. For several weeks the highly-politicized and always-fevered Quebec media were talking about the life-and-death struggle of the sovereignty movement. And the ROC media amplified the stir caused by PC leader Jean Charest, a Quebecer, who is widely regarded as having won both the English-language and French-language debates on television. But the underlying import of the campaign in Quebec is quite ominous.

The reality is that this is a federal election and not a Quebec provincial election, and is thus of limited interest to inward-looking Quebec voters. It is true that the Bloc have waged a poor campaign under their new and inept leader Gilles Duceppe. It is also true that former Premier Jacques Parizeau, in his newly-published book *Pour un Québec souverain*, put the Quebec political class in an uproar by hinting at a secret

plan during the 1995 referendum campaign for unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) from Canada if the Yes side won. And the campaign has exposed the many shadings of Quebec nationalism, both hard and soft.

But a glance at Quebec's political geography—with its heavy concentration of the federalist vote on the Island of Montreal—suggests that the Bloc will still control a substantial number of seats in the Commons. The organized sovereigntist "militants," led by Premier Lucien Bouchard and with a cameo appearance by Parizeau, will be going all out for the Bloc.

Even if the Bloc wins only 40 seats, their total will in all likelihood still exceed that of the PC, which currently holds only two seats.

In Quebec itself, the decimated Tories lack the organization and party loyalty necessary to capitalize on the recent boomlet of popularity for PC leader Jean Charest, a local boy. A close look shows that Charest attracts the Québécois by attacking the Prime Minister for what little political courage Chrétien has been able to muster in Ottawa's so-called Plan B.

The Prime Minister still commands little respect and less affection in his native province. In fact the self-described "little guy from Shawinigan" may well lose his seat in the Mauricie to a prominent member of the Bloc.

All in all, despite considerable ambiguity in the attitude of Quebecers toward Canada and federalism, the tumultuous course of the campaign in Quebec may end up convincing the new Liberal Government that Quebec politics remain basically a snakepit they dare to enter at their peril. Together with the rise of their nemesis Mr. Manning to Leader of the Opposition, the Liberals may find that the actual election results in Quebec have the effect of constraining their political options and reducing their margin for maneuver on the national-unity issue.

So the prospect now is for the timid and complacent Liberals to form a Government, with the virulently anti-Quebec Reformers as Official Opposition, with the battle-scarred Bloc Québécois as the third party in the House, with the PC as an official party but perhaps just barely so, and the NDP, which is currently doing well in

Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as an official party also.

On the surface this might seem like a stable arrangement, but a look at the bitter divisions and passions crystallized by the drawing of the Quebec issue in the federal election campaign suggests that it may be otherwise. With a Quebec provincial election expected next year, and a new referendum freshly promised by Premier Bouchard, the new alignment of parties in the House of Commons will lead more readily to political instability than to consensus on the central issue of Canada's future. —JR—

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CANADIAN-AMERICAN FORUM

Canada Without Quebec — A Country With a Hole in Its Heart

by Brian Mulroney

You have invited me to speak about Canada in the 21st century. When it comes, I will have celebrated (I hope) my 60th birthday. Ten of those years will have been spent in Parliament, as national leader of my party, almost nine of them as Prime Minister. However, my perspective on the 21st century has also been shaped by other experiences: by my boyhood on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River; by having attended university in Nova Scotia in the late 1950s, and in Quebec at the beginning of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s; by a career in law and business in this country in the 1970s and 1980s; and since 1993 by my activities in law and business internationally.



To people outside this country, Canada is the very model of a successful nation - federal, bilingual, multicultural, diverse, prosperous and at peace.

In the new century almost upon us, no country has more to offer to its own people and to the people of the world. The only question now is whether this generation of Canadians—and our leaders—have vision and courage equal to the task.



The Referendum Results and Their Causes

So how did you like the referendum results? Probably not very. The sight of a great country coming within an inch of self-destruction is hardly reassuring.

Canadians probably were surprised. They had after all, in the weeks before, been told not to worry—a persuasive victory was at hand. A few years earlier, Canadians had been soothed by statements from some of the same people to the effect that the failure to ratify a signed constitutional agreement was of little consequence. “Don’t worry,” the Solons said, “Quebecers will get over their disappointment.”

The Right Honourable Brian Mulroney was Prime Minister of Canada from 1984 to 1993. This article is adapted from remarks before the Canadian Club of Toronto on April 14. Mr. Mulroney practices law at the Montreal firm of Ogilvy Renault.

Those statements were not true then and are not true now. Forget a separatist Premier. There will never be a federalist Premier of Quebec who will sign the 1982 Constitution without changes that include reasonable provisions for the uniqueness of Quebec in Confederation, and hence for the security of the French language and culture in the Canada of the 21st century. The plain fact is that if Canada and Canada’s Constitution cannot help guarantee that security in the next century, many Quebecers would rather try to achieve it as an independent state.

Public Opinion in French and English Canada

Today, renewed federalism beats sovereignty as the majority preference of Quebecers every time a poll is held. Unfortunately, there is no proposal for renewed federalism from either provincial or federal governments at this time — nor, apparently, any in progress. Such a proposal could win a referendum in the year 2000 by attracting Quebec federalists, including the hundreds of thousands who have reluctantly concluded that such an effort will not soon be made. If it came early enough, such a proposal might

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even eliminate the prospect of a referendum altogether by helping to elect a federalist government at the next provincial election.

For many reasons, including understandable fatigue after past battles, much of public opinion in English Canada is completely uninterested: “If they’re not satisfied, let them go” is the statement often heard. Do we continue this ill-tempered drift towards inevitable crisis? Or do we try to find the common ground that will enable Canada’s federalists to enter the next millennium with today’s uncertainty dispelled?

continued ☞

How is this achieved? With political leadership that is not fearful of public opinion but is resolved to lead it. It would help clear the air if people were told the simple truth about plan A and plan B. Plan B appeals to a lot of people because it allows us to say "Boy, did we ever show them." Show them what? Plan B, brought to its natural conclusion, really means that Canada will be destroyed in an orderly, legalistic manner on a Friday rather than in more disruptive fashion on a Wednesday.

Then what? We would be left with a country with a hole in its heart.

The Meech Lake Accord and Lost Opportunities

Can the challenge be solved in terms that are fair for all Canadians? The answer is clearly yes. Essentially, Meech Lake offered the additional security Quebec needed to sign the 1982 Constitution and resolve once and for all the question of Quebec's place in Canada. I will believe until my dying day that a seminal opportunity for Canada was missed in 1990. But, for all its reasonableness and simplicity, the time has come to put Meech aside.

*...the [Quebec] problem
cannot be solved without a
constitutional initiative....*

I believe it was a mistake for the Government of Canada to proceed with patriation over the objection of the Quebec National Assembly. We changed the rules of the game affecting Quebec without Quebec's consent. The British North America Act had served us pretty well for 115 years.

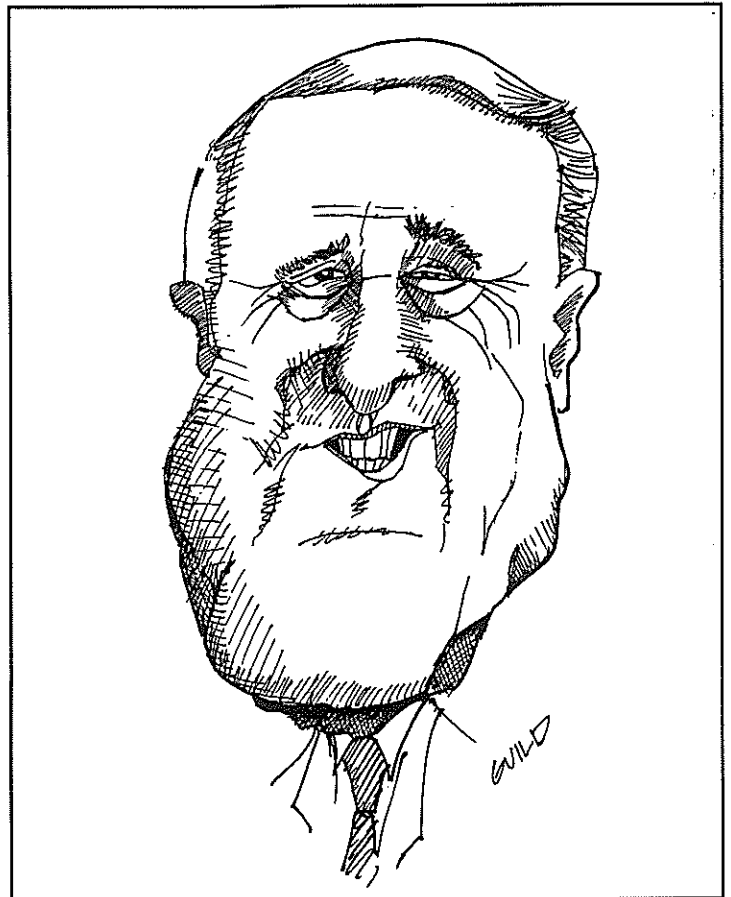
Among federalists, on this vital question of national unity and constitutional reform, let us begin again. Let us wipe the slate clean of partisanship and find a new formula, vocabulary and timetable for renewal so that, for our children and their generation, this matter will be resolved.

The Prime Minister and Constitutional Change

In the eyes of many, constitutional reform is a tar baby and no one wants to touch it. To do so is both unfashionable and unpopular.

But Prime Ministers are not chosen to seek popularity. They are chosen to provide leadership. There are times when Canadians must be told not what they want to hear but what they have to know.

And what they have to know is that, of the various



problems that confront Canada, only one—the Quebec problem—has the potential to break up the country. They have to know that the problem cannot be solved without a constitutional initiative, and that if our leaders, federal and provincial, persist in putting it off, we will fight another referendum with a hand and a half tied behind our backs.

There is nothing we can do that will attract the support of convinced separatists. But the majority of Quebecers remain attached to Canada. If we can make the reasonable constitutional changes that will secure their place in the Canada of the 21st century (and which threaten no one else's place) French Canadian Quebecers will respond strongly to reclaim those golden opportunities from a country they explored and settled in the cold and brutal winters of their youth, over 350 years ago.

We have to confront the problem of our disunity for what it is — a completely unnecessary impediment to our future prosperity. Canada's Prime Minister — whoever holds that office after the next election — must engage the provinces and summon the people of Canada to weigh what we have to gain by resolving this problem and what we have to lose from failure. Before Canadians will be able to fully enjoy the promise of the 21st century, they must deal with a problem, created and unresolved, in the 20th century.