
Quebec and Canada: Is Divorce the Final Answer?

by Robert Normand

Many factors have led me to make a very pessimistic evaluation of our desire to keep on living in the kind of country that Canada was, and that you have been used to. But before trying to decide whether divorce is the final answer, let's take a brief look at the Canadian situation today to better understand the reasons why.

Western Canadians are frustrated by the concentration of political and economic powers in central Canada and are disillusioned as to the real possibilities of increasing their strength through a "Triple E" Senate. Mind you, I never understood how Ontario and Quebec could agree to dilute their representativity by accepting an equal number of Senators for, let's say, Ontario and Prince Edward Island, or even Ontario and the Maritimes together. Nor can I understand how we can improve the efficiency of our political system by adding another elected body with real powers to the numerous existing levels of government, i.e. municipalities, school boards, regional authorities and provinces.

Westerners are also tired of having to put up in post offices French signs which are useless and which they believe were imposed by Quebec while this province, with its Bill 178, does not allow English-speaking retailers to advertise in English on their store fronts! Of course the Quebec Government never pushed for a bilingual Canada. Rather it was the policy adopted by French-speaking politicians in Ottawa, particularly Mr. Trudeau in the seventies.

The recent election of an NDP Government in Ontario at a time when socialists are losing ground in Europe shows that Ontarians are not the bunch of WASPS they used to be; that the political leadership of the traditional parties does not attract the electorate like it used to do; and more damaging, that flirting too closely with Quebec, as Mr. Peterson did, is certainly not acceptable to most Ontarians.

I'll pass over the fact that extremists in the Kingston area stomped on the Quebec flag, and that the attitude of

certain municipalities such as Sault Ste Marie have prohibited the use of French in public affairs. These incidents are the work of a small minority but they have attracted a lot of sympathy from other Ontario residents.

I sense in English Canada a very aggressive attitude towards French-speaking people and more specifically against the French in Quebec. Until last year, English Canadians had little sympathy for their English counterparts in Westmount, and considered them much like loud-mouthed Rhodesians with their own English school system and their three English universities in Quebec. Not anymore!

English Canadians also blamed Quebec for passing Bill 178 that only partially reinforced the unilingualism imposed by Bill 101. Instead of hearing the condescending phrase "what does Quebec want?", we now hear "to hell with you" or "good-bye and good luck!".

The non-adoption of the Meech Lake Accord was not solely due to the combined efforts of premiers McKenna of New Brunswick and Wells of Newfoundland, but rather was much more the political result of a rejection of the Accord by a majority of English Canadians as clearly reflected in the polls. Elijah Harper, who blocked the passage of the Accord in Manitoba last June, was simply the instrument and concrete voice of English Canada.

In Quebec, the rejection of the Meech Lake Accord did much to increase our traditional nationalism. Those who advocated federalism in the past cannot and do not do so anymore. This word has become a swear word in Quebec, and in my opinion, Jean Chretien who has reiterated his traditional belief in federalism would not even get 25% of the vote if elections were held tomorrow. Those, like Claude Ryan, the provincial Liberal leader at the time of the referendum, who voted NO in 1980, are now advocating some sort of sovereignty-association, something they totally rejected ten years ago.

The members of our business community who were afraid of a decline in our economic wealth if the referendum had succeeded, now believe that we might as well get it over with now and fast, instead of letting the problem go sour. While this may not be true for all

Robert Normand is President and Publisher of Le Soleil. In September 1990 he presented the 5th annual Jean Lesage lecture to the Americas Society/Canadian Affairs in New York.

economic leaders, it is certainly the case for those who have agreed to speak out publicly.

English Canada in rejecting the Meech Lake Accord missed the best opportunity of buying peace with Quebec at the lowest possible price, as this Accord would simply have recognized in our constitution facts that already existed, without giving Quebec any of the additional jurisdiction that it had demanded over the previous 30 years, powers that would enable Quebec to better develop its economy and its cultural specificity. Canada rejected the olive branch that Quebec was offering and Quebecers generally concluded, without hostility but with understandable disappointment that either they surrender and revert to the status of water carriers as their forefathers had done or that they seriously envisage independence, one way or another.

Premier Bourassa's final decision following the failure of the Meech Lake Accord was, and rightly so, to boycott all federal-provincial conferences, just as Premier Levesque had done in 1981. This means that Senate reform will not take place for a long time, that the Indians and Inuit can forget their special constitutional status, and that the frustration of English Canada towards French and Quebecers will continue to grow.

These are the perfect ingredients for a divorce! And that is where we stand now. What will happen next? Let's look at various possible scenarios.

First, the **status quo**. Possible, but certainly not probable based on the description I have just given you. Some, like Mr. Chretien and Mr. Trudeau, say we should forget constitutional discussions for a while, go through a cooling-off period, and concentrate on economic growth. But they are about the only ones to take such a stand in Quebec. I thought the dramatic increase in Quebec nationalism after the rejection of Meech Lake might fade away over the summer vacation and be partly forgotten in our long Indian summer, but that is not the case right now. Those like the former Canadian Ambassador in Paris and former Member of the Mulroney Cabinet, Lucien Bouchard, who became an Independent MP because of Meech Lake, did much to convince the voters of Montreal-St-Marie, a Liberal riding, to elect by a strong majority a pro-independent candidate in a recent by-election.

Second possibility: A **renewed federalism** for Quebec through one-to-one negotiations between Premier Bourassa and Prime Minister Mulroney. In my opinion, this mechanism can only be used to settle concrete problems that arise from time to time between governments and not to develop a constitutional package that would satisfy Quebec and then be imposed on the rest of Canada. Mr. Mulroney was elected by all Canadians and not just Quebecers. If he ever believes that

he could be re-elected again, he must count on English Canada which is certainly not ready to give Quebec more than it refused just a few months ago!

The other Premiers want to have their say if there are going to be constitutional talks because they believe they are worth as much consideration as Mr. Bourassa, and they know that they must say "yes" to any substantial constitutional amendment requiring unanimity under our constitution. Therefore, this possibility is also very slim.

Third possibility: **new constitutional discussions** that would deal not only with the traditional demands of Quebec but also with Senate reform, Aboriginal rights, ecology and so on. This possibility is more interesting but it is not for now and is anyway full of potential pitfalls.

I see some merit in following this path because I believe that constitutions are not changed to please academics or to improve the esthetic qualities of the document. They are usually amended to settle crises after clashes that are often accompanied with violence, bloodshed and death.

We were nowhere near that with Meech Lake and you know the results, but we may come close to it if Quebec decides to change its place in the constitutional structure and if its decision is rejected. Then we will be faced with a real crisis requiring a real solution. But this is not for today. In trying to resolve too many problems at the same time, we often fail to resolve any of them, as was the case for the numerous constitutional discussions held in the seventies.

The fourth possibility is a **real crisis**: the imposition by Quebec of a special constitutional status which if not accepted would result in a unilateral proclamation of independence. Wow! Now we're talking business! And that, in my humble opinion, is what is going to happen with a few variations.

An Act was passed recently by the Quebec legislature to create an enlarged parliamentary commission to examine our constitutional future. This body, presided over by two prominent Quebec business leaders, has among its members, the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Parizeau and Mr. Bouchard. Many believe that this commission will come up with a report next March that will propose some form of sovereignty-association with the rest of Canada. I do not think so. I feel that it will be useful to air problems, to submit a list of various possibilities, to assess their economic impact and to let the political players choose what suits them best.

Mr. Parizeau knows what he wants; full and immediate independence, Mr. Bouchard goes along the same lines. Only Mr. Bourassa, who can no longer be a federalist after the failure of Meech Lake (the young members of his Liberal Party advocated Quebec

Independence at their last convention recently), needs time to develop a solution that would seek to accommodate the rising nationalism of Quebecers and their taste for Canada at a time when countries are integrating their activities rather than separating and isolating them.

What could that solution be for Mr. Bourassa?

- A special status in a renewed federalism? That would be the minimum to retain credibility among the electorate.
- A federalism à la carte in which the status of its components could differ? Quite possible!
- A true Confederation like Switzerland with Quebec as one participating state and either the 9 other provinces or the four other regions as political entities? Why not?
- A mixture of these options with defence, monetary policy, currency, postal service and so on in the hands of a central authority controlled by the constituent parts, be they province or regions. Not such a bad idea, is it?

But, and this is my conclusion regarding the fourth possibility - the special status of Quebec in a completely renewed Canada will only be agreed to by the rest of Canada and implemented, if Quebec has the courage to affirm, calmly and seriously, that it is ready to declare independence unilaterally failing an acceptance by the rest of Canada, and intends to be taken seriously when it says so!

Separation and independence therefore constitute the fifth real possibility that we can envisage. I personally do not think that this is the best solution for Quebec or Canada, or for the United States for that matter, at a time when we must open our borders to survive instead of closing them and when nations are taking full advantage of the fantastic development of communications on our planet. But it is essential to consider this option seriously. It is viable and would allow Quebec to prosper on its own after a period of economic upheaval during the transition phase. This would not be a high price to pay to buy peace for the future instead of maintaining the growing frustrations that we have witnessed for so long! Some cynics, me included, add, more or less seriously, that Quebec will have to face the realities of competition if it becomes independent, instead of being partly supported by federal transfer payments and will therefore be forced to swing to the right and become a paradise for entrepreneurs.

But such thoughts are cynical indeed. Quebec can very well develop and enjoy prosperity as an independent state. We are no longer a traditional priest-ridden society where cheap labour abounds and Quebecers are much better educated than 30 years ago. They are proud of themselves and they show it in their cultural products to the point that our song writers and performers are often at the top of the hit parade in France. We have formed a

young generation of skilled and aggressive business persons and managers convinced that they must attack foreign markets vigorously. We have also used government and crown corporations as a lever to develop our economy in cooperation with the private sector. The SGF controls Domtar and Marine Industries, the Caisse de Depot has assets in excess of 30 billion dollars, Hydro Quebec has brought us many aluminum companies through its pricing policies, and Desjardins, our huge financial cooperative movement controls nearly 40 billion dollars with the savings of Quebecers.

I have outlined five possibilities for the future of Quebec and Canada. There may well be others or at least variations on the ones that I have mentioned. One thing is certain: Quebec is about to determine where it intends to stand vis-à-vis the rest of Canada and should complete this process within a year's time with an election, a referendum or a statement by the National Assembly.

My biggest question is, what is the rest of Canada going to do? Most Canadians believe that they have shut the mouth of Quebec by rejecting Meech Lake and that the Mohawks have completed the job that Elijah Harper started last June in Manitoba. They believe that Quebec is not ready for real action, and they add, without having seriously thought about it, "If Quebec wants to go, let it go!" But if we do go, Ontario and Ottawa will continue to generate the same frustrations in the rest of Canada, and Ontario, with its NDP Government, will not always be willing to continue to subsidize the rest of Canada since it will need the money to pay for social measures. As for the Maritimes, they would be geographically isolated from the rest of Canada. Canada would also have a price to pay to keep on going its own way. Only a few intellectuals in English Canada have begun to address these issues.

Some even wonder if provinces like British Columbia or the Prairies would be tempted to become part of the United States, and wonder at the same time whether our American friends would be interested in subsidizing them.

Canada is bound to change substantially over the next five years. Quebecers will demand a new deal with Canada. Quebec will become independent and prosper if Canada refuses. An independent Quebec would be bound to enter into all sorts of agreements with Canada after independence and they would then form some sort of common market or Confederation. So instead of reaching the goal through a long and costly process, we might as well do it right now.

I guess my conclusion is that politics being what it is, *si vis pacem para bellum* - if you want peace, prepare for war.*