

However, with this said, the referendum cannot bring any concrete change in the immediate future. Even a resounding "yes" on May 20 would not bring about either the breakup of the Canadian confederation or the emergence of an independent Quebec. Canada would still be there the morning of the 21st, and for a number of years afterward. Nor would a resounding "no" settle anything immediately, since it would still be necessary to sit down at the negotiating table to correct certain shortcomings in the Canadian constitution and adapt our institutions to new situations which arose in the middle of the century. As a former Prime Minister said: a victory of the "yes" vote would not mean the end of Canada; a victory of the "no" would not mean the end of the problem.

And this is how the very people who are holding the referendum would have it. The question being put to the people of Quebec asks them to give their provincial government a mandate to negotiate with the rest of Canada, nothing more. The preamble to the question even stipulates that no change will be made to the current political institutions before a second referendum has been held on the nature of such future changes.

It is therefore clear that the referendum of May 20 is just one step in a long process of which the result, whatever it may be, will not be seen for a long time yet. For the implementation of its secessionist project, the current government of Quebec has chosen a strategy which could be termed "one step at a time".

It is interesting to examine the political factors behind this choice. The traditional proponents of sovereignty, throughout world history, have called for more haste, even precipitation. What, then, has inspired so much restraint and caution?

First, and entirely to their credit, is a clear concern for working democratically. They do not want to force on Quebecers a sovereignty the people do not want. On the other hand, and this is to the credit of their federalist adversaries, the secessionist proposal has never been laid under an interdict. It is perfectly legal in Canada to promote democratically the sovereignty-association set forth by the Parti Québécois, and the only weapons used by those who reject it are those of persuasion. Under these conditions, it is understandable that the Quebec secessionists have opted for a strategy that involves a number of gradual steps in the pursuit of their objective.