

Vox Populi

What did the Canadian people themselves think of the constitutional proposals? Gallup and other public opinion polls suggested that they were often much more enthusiastic than their provincial premiers.

Among those offering an opinion, 87 percent of Canadians agreed with the need for a new constitution, 89 percent confirmed their belief in the parliamentary system, and 98 percent agreed that the constitution should enshrine basic human rights.

Many provincial premiers quite erroneously anticipated popular antipathy to linguistic rights. To the proposal that, where their numbers warrant, French-speaking minorities outside of Quebec and English-speaking minorities within Quebec should be guaranteed the right to state-financed education for their children in their own language, a remarkable 88 percent of Canadians nationwide having an opinion agreed. In Quebec the figure was an even more impressive 92 percent, in contrast to Premier Lévesque's efforts to curtail the availability of schooling in English.

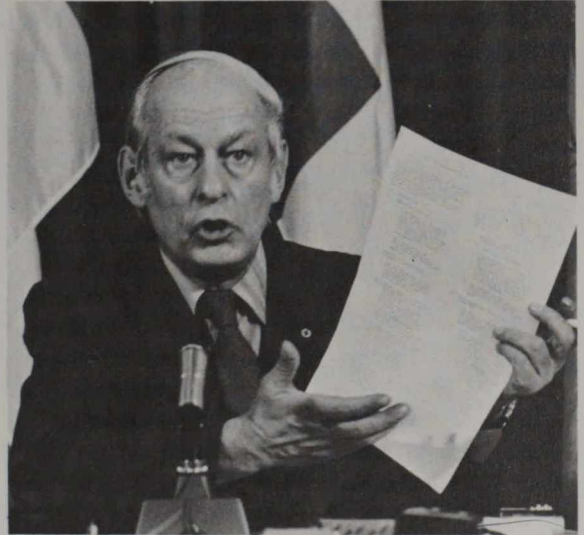
French-speaking Canadians have always shown a willingness to learn English. Traditionally at least half of them have been bilingual. Today full 92 percent declare themselves in public opinion polls to be either bilingual or wish they had become so. A change in attitudes has been marked among English-speaking Canadians: whereas in the immediate postwar years barely 5 percent could claim to be able to also speak French, the figure today is 22 percent.

Canadians also support the principle that richer provinces should help the poorer ones. Traditionally this has meant certain provinces, notably Ontario, providing substantial portions of the budgets of poorer provinces. Nonetheless, 96 percent of Ontarians with an opinion on this proposal endorsed the principle. Even in the prairies, where newly oil-rich Alberta will be expected to contribute much more per capita in future to the poorer provinces, 76 percent agreed; nationally the figure was 89 percent.

The British North America Act decreed that natural resources are the property of the provinces but that interprovincial and international trade was a federal responsibility. Certain provincial governments interpreted this division of powers to mean that the provinces should have exclusive power to dictate production levels, tax revenue, national prices and international customers for their natural resources. Polls showed that only 24.8 percent of respondents shared this view.

Several provincial governments had also imposed restrictions preventing workers coming in from other

provinces to work in certain fields. Even in the economically depressed Atlantic provinces only 23 percent of respondents endorsed this position, and in Quebec two out of three persons polled were opposed; nationally 75 percent of respondents giving an opinion believed that job opportunities anywhere in Canada should be available to all Canadians.



Premier René Lévesque condemns the new constitution.

In spite of the polarisation between federal and provincial opinions during the patriation campaign, most Canadians expressed a steadily increasing confidence that confederation would not break up and that the differences between the various parts of Canada will be resolved. In January 1945 only 63 percent of Canadians shared this confidence; by March 1981, 80 percent of those willing to voice an opinion were convinced.

The bottom line in public opinion polls throughout 1980 and 1981, however, never varied. Although individually the great majority of Canadians sided with the federal government in its constitutional objectives, two out of three were consistently opposed to the federal government asking the British Parliament to enshrine these objectives without the consent of a substantial majority of the provincial governments. Canadian generosity of spirit obviously included a paradoxical insistence on the virtues of compromise. It was this consistent public opinion on the question, perhaps even more than the threat of British parliamentary opposition or the Supreme Court's verdict, that probably persuaded the federal government to make its one last determined attempt in November 1981 to seek a majority approval from provincial governments.