

Canadians have often complained that the American press ignores them.

In truth it has, for decades, given considerable attention to Canada's hockey teams and hockey players (and, more recently, baseball teams and baseball players) but has sometimes paid little heed to the rise and fall of governments and to major shifts in government policy. We are pleased to say that the coverage has improved in recent years.

In this special issue of CANADA TODAY/D'AUJOURD'HUI we examine the way the American media reported last spring's referendum in Quebec. A majority of Quebecers voted against a plan offered by Premier René Lévesque and his Parti Québécois which would have given the Quebec government a mandate to negotiate political sovereignty for Quebec combined with economic association with the rest of Canada.

The coverage was not flawless—one TV commentator in Washington, D.C., said that Quebecers were voting to see if they should end 200 years of British rule—but it was, by and large, very good.

Most papers (and other members of the media) covered the events completely and fairly. The commercial TV networks confined themselves to one or two minute summaries, and a few journals missed or exaggerated nuances.

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## The New York Times

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The **New York Times** has traditionally had complete and perceptive reports on Canada. It did another good job on the Quebec referendum.

On April 4 (a month and a half before the event), James Reston rephrased a point raised by Canada's Governor General Edward Schreyer:

*Will Canada still exist as a country at the end of the decade?* Mr. Reston asked, and he wondered if Americans, and the American press in particular, were paying too much attention to the happenings in Iran and Afghanistan and not enough to our own neighbors.

The same day, **Times** correspondent Henry Giniger was reporting the latest poll in Quebec: 41.2 per cent of those questioned said they intended to vote Yes—in favour of sovereignty-association—and 40.9 per cent said they would vote No. He noted that there had been slippage among the Yes group and suggested that the eighteen per cent who were undecided were the key to the outcome.

Mr. Giniger watched the Quebec skies during the following weeks for tell-tale signs. In

early April he noted that *several prominent federalists have said they will vote yes as the only way to shock English-speaking Canada into agreeing to give Quebec more power to protect its culture.*

On the 28th of April Mr. Giniger reported a dead heat in the polls, forty-four per cent Yes, forty-four per cent No, and he described an anguished exchange Mr. Lévesque had with a Jewish group in Montreal. The audience were among those Quebecers who are primarily English-speaking, and the logical assumption was that almost all of them would vote No. Quebec's Premier was walking a difficult line. Lévesque referred to the "handicap" that the French-speakers had to overcome (surveys indicated that four-fifths of the English-speakers would vote No); and he added, "If the result is only forty-eight or forty-nine per cent for the yes side it will require very steady nerves on both sides."

In the next few weeks the undecided block dropped from eighteen to twelve per cent but remained significant. Many citizens were telling pollsters that they had not made up their minds, but Giniger reported, *Some of the optimism of the negative side is based on the belief that those*

*who are hesitating are in fact fearful of where a yes vote will lead Quebec.*

Meanwhile, there were new forces at play.

As the **Times** reported, Premier William Davis of Ontario, Quebec's neighbour and Canada's most populous province, had said that while he would certainly not tell Quebec voters how to vote, he felt obliged to say, "In no way, shape or form will Sovereignty-Association be negotiated by the government which I lead because to do so would be to negotiate the break-up of Canada."

On May 16, after Prime Minister Trudeau made what Giniger described as *one of the most impassioned speeches of his career* to a crowd of 9,000 Quebecers, the reporter noted, *In the last few days . . . Mr. Lévesque has appeared less certain that a majority of yes votes will be forthcoming next Tuesday; and he quoted him as saying, "It's going to be close, we can win, we must win, we shall win."* Giniger added that the strong possibility that a majority of French-speaking voters will vote yes only to see their votes negated by a solid bloc of no votes by the English-speaking minority is causing tension and unease.

On Sunday the 18th Mr. Giniger had a prescient feature

Cover photo: This **Baltimore Sun** pressman is checking newspapers as they come off the press. The paper is now converting from the letterpress method pictured to more efficient offset presses.