

# Debating the Québec referendum

**NO / The sovereigntists are idealists, dreaming in la la land**

I thought to myself, how can I contribute to the already overwhelming repertoire of writing on the issue of Quebec sovereignty? Yet, in view of last week's section "Two anglos think about a Yes vote," I feel

particularly compelled to put in my two cents worth, especially as an English Québécois who will have to absorb the impact of the referendum's outcome. I also speak from the standpoint of a concerned Canadian discouraged by the prevailing attitudes on this matter.

If for a momentary lapse of time, I were to take off my anglophone, federalist, very-Canadian blinders, I could perhaps share the opinion so espoused by Zack Taylor in his column two weeks ago in which he states his support for the YES side.

For these few seconds, I could be devoted to the idea that Quebec's divorce from Canada would mean the lifting of the insufferable logjam that has survived in both Quebec's and Canada's constitutional politics during the last few decades. I could understand the idea that the dream of an independent Quebec would come true, and that those dreams of fostering a culture would be fortified legally and politically against its Canadian counterparts. And, I could comprehend the idea that for Canadians, the constitution would instil a sense of confidence and security instead of creating the urge to rattle off its injustices, its failures, and its downfalls. (Jeez, people are so critical. At least, we have the darn thing!).

To be honest, there was a time I credited the staunch Péquistes and their dreams with an inspiration that frankly I have yet to witness anywhere else in this country. For this, I feel privileged to have grown up surrounded by such a motivated and passionate people.

But when I look around now, and I see the leader of the Action démocratique — a guy a year older than myself — and other young Québécois like him, I realize amidst their flowery rhetoric, they dream in la-la land.

If anything, a separation from the country would mean even greater vulnerability to the national market forces which would no longer include it. More importantly, it would mean a political and economic smallness within the wild and woolly world beyond these safe boundaries.

Come on, Quebec, let's see you try and survive in that competitive, chaotic world out there. Personally, I am not up for this challenge. There are idealists out there who are tampering with my job opportunity and my lifestyle choices. What is most maddening is that with a YES victory, English Québécois will be deprived of their national identity at a time when a sense of belonging is essential for survival

in this world.

Unfortunately, people sometimes miss the marked distinction between the sensible Québécois who is committed to preserving the French Canadian culture and the ardent, dreamy, radical yahoos who work in the Assemblée Nationale and cannot see beyond their tortière-filled bellies.

The point here is that when people outside Quebec make a decision, or I should say those that take the time to do so, they would do well to remember that the outcome of the referendum will greatly affect more than the faces of those Québécois that we see on front pages of newspapers and on the television.

I know few English Québécois who support separation, for rational and emotional reasons, and if English Québécois were to vote YES as a last resort, then I think there is a serious lack of foresight in their position. For

anyone committed to the preservation of Quebec — with its distinct language, culture, heritage, and legal system — the decision to vote YES would be rash, illogical, and downright short-sighted.

I address not only the two authors of last issue's YES propaganda, but the others out there who support separation. It seems to me that you are supporting a trend that could someday backfire on your own lives.

It might be something to think of a day when the monster could rear its nasty head on *you* and *your* community starts to divide. Then you will know what its like to come up against a wall of apathy and impatience.

It would certainly be more settling to be assured of a stronger support system out there, to be assured that other Canadians are informed enough and concerned enough to know that the outcome of separation promises irreconcilable damage to many communities in the province.

KRISTIN MCNEILL

**NO / Saying Yes but meaning No is misguided**

Zack Taylor may not himself be a "sovereigntiste convaincu" nor a Pequiste, but he will be voting with them. He will be, through his Yes vote, assisting the so-called sovereigntists to separate Québec from Canada.

It is voters like Mr. Taylor that the Pequistes have targeted with their referendum question. These are the ambivalent Québécois, the ones that believe Québec should stay within Canada, but will not go so far as to separate. Voting Yes, as Lucien Bouchard would like voters to believe, would not lead directly to independence but to a new round of negotiations with Canada. Failing a new federalist deal within one year, Québec will have the option to separate.

This is the best of all worlds for the Yes side. They are convincing voters that they aren't "exactly" separating, while at the same time the wheels of independence are set in motion. In addition, they are saying that the leaders of the rest of Canada will be more forthcoming in deliberations with a Québec outside of Canada than within. It's unbelievable.

Mr. Taylor is taking a risk with his vote, and a miscalculated one at that. There will be no sovereignty association deal within a year after a Yes vote. This opinion is not mine alone, it is shared by nearly all of the provincial premiers (including Mike Harris, who, I'm afraid, has proven he's good to his word) and main federal and native leaders.

I can't see how a deal will happen. First, negotiating sovereignty association with Québec is a bad political move for the rest of Canada. In the current atmosphere of tough-minded populism, who would dare defy the wishes of their constituents by negotiating with Québec? Ralph Klein? Clyde Wells? Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come?

Secondly, it will be impossible to achieve consensus within one year. There are too many questions that remain unanswered. Who will negotiate for Canada? What exactly are Canadian interests? What happens to the members of parliament and cabinet from Québec, including Jean Chretien? What if we need a federal election or referendum, and what happens if those results do not favour negotiations?

It is ludicrous to pretend a new deal will happen when most signs point to the contrary. Furthermore, it is irresponsible to say that once this deal fails, which it will, Québec will have no choice but to separate.

It is highly conceivable a year will pass without a deal and Québec will insist on action. At this point, there will be two main options. The first is Québec will declare its independence unilaterally. A new nation of convinced sovereigntists will then exist. Or the second option is we will have an extended deadline. More deliberation, more negotiating, more time — a new logjam.

There must be alternatives. I encourage Mr. Taylor and all prospective Yes voters to reconsider. Please reconsider and respect this country, its laws, and its citizens.

JEFF ZUK

**YES / A week in Montréal hasn't changed my mind.**

It's Wednesday morning. I always get the shivers when I mark a ballot — did I make the right choice? And for the right reasons?

This time, like all the other times, I think I'll end up confident that my decision was correct. I'm not an inexperienced voter, after all. I've just moved here from downtown Montréal, where in the space of three years I voted in one referendum, federal, provincial, and municipal elections, and a federal by-election.

This morning, I marked a Yes on my ballot for the Québec referendum.

I had long planned to, but it was the experience of going back to Montréal last week that cemented my decision.

I hooked up with a prof I know, a well-known expert on Québec politics. He is worried that the three-way agreement between Bouchard, Parizeau and Dumont was overly centralizing the debate. Québécois for the Yes, he reminded me, are going in that direction for many reasons. I was reminded of the comedy routine from the late 70s — Québécois want a strong and independent Québec in a strong and united Canada.

An analysis in the most recent issue of *L'Actualité* exemplifies this: from polling data they divined six categories of intention, ranging from the "maple leaves" to the "fleurs de lys." Dyed in the wool federalists and nationalists account for about 20 per cent each. Those who are converted to separation as a last resort and those who want a more adaptable federalism account for a further 18 or 19 per cent each. The vote at the end of the month, as we all know, hinges on the two remaining categories: those who favour a new partnership with the rest of Canada, and those who are undecided.

These sorts of number games show us how high the stakes are. When 80 per cent of the population has settled into two intransigent camps, there is very little room to move.

## Why not a Yes?

My professor friend believes that a narrow No would be a greater tragedy than a narrow Yes. A No vote (and surprisingly this sentiment was echoed in a column in the arch-federalist *Montréal Gazette*) will bring more years of economic uncertainty and political agitation.

The federalist camp can't convincingly promise change in the event of the No vote. The legacy of the 1982 patriation process, in which the Constitution was amended without the consent of Québec, and the failure of the Meech and Charlottetown Accords has left the federalists with precious little credibility in the agent of change department.

Although a Yes vote risks the secession of Québec, most polls show that the vast majority of Québécois and Yes supporters aren't interested in seceding — and are not likely to allow secession to happen. As a result of this

of this, it is entirely likely that a Yes vote would actually spell the end of the influence of the radical element in the PQ as epitomised by Parizeau. We are witnessing this already — the June 12 partnership agreement and the elevation of Bouchard to "chief negotiator" being just two examples.

Despite the risks and dangers, a Yes vote could provide the best opportunity for at least a partial resolution of our political impasse. The hitch, of course, is whether the rest of Canada will co-operate. If a deal is not struck, we'll end up with two countries we never wanted in the first place, just as happened in Czechoslovakia.

## Who's seceding from whom?

More and more, I'm starting to think that rest of Canada has been seceding from Québec, rather than vice versa. The two solitudes have always been far apart, and never more so than at Canada's inception in 1867. John A. Macdonald, after all, was a devout believer in the assimilation of the French.

It was only in the 1960s that the two sides moved closer together. Prime Minister Pearson appointed the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which lasted half a decade and could have formed the foundation of a new Canadian compromise.

Pierre Trudeau, bless his soul, spelled the end of that direction by emphasizing provincial equality over a special constitutional recognition for Québec, individual over collective identity, and multiculturalism over biculturalism. Whether Trudeau's policies are inherently good or bad is not the issue. The fact is, Trudeau closed the door on the last comprehensive attempt to unite the solitudes in a new partnership. The content of many of the 1982 amendments and their adoption without the consent of the government and opposition in Québec sealed off any chance the new Canadian compromise glimpsed in the 1960s might have had.

Once a major change in the vision of a country takes place, it is very difficult to reverse. Trudeau made such a change, and left millions of Québécois behind in the process. On October 30, we'll find out if they number a majority.

Yes, I am taking a risk, and yes, it is a calculated and strategic one. But in order to be true to my ideals of what Canada means and what it should be, I have to take this risk.

I'm the first to admit that the stakes are high. If I am wrong, I will regret it in the long run. If I am right, we should use this historic opportunity to place the devils of national fractiousness and mistrust behind us, to reunite the two solitudes of Hugh MacLennan in a way that is satisfactory to all concerned.

ZACK TAYLOR