

# The political landscape

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed in Quebec a 'quiet revolution', in which the rigid conservatism of three centuries was dramatically replaced by adventurous intellectual and social changes and an increasing self-awareness by French Canadians of the value of their distinctive heritage and traditions. This self-awareness in the 1970s led to growing assertiveness on the national scene. In 1968, René Lévesque had founded the Parti Québécois, dedicated to withdrawing Quebec from the federation and making it an independent state. Pragmatic French-Canadians, fearing the economic consequences of such separatism, twice rejected the party's call to arms in provincial elections, but when Lévesque soft-pedalled independence in favour of efficient government in 1976, he won a decisive victory.

Anxious nevertheless to pursue his dream of independence, Lévesque proposed a provincial referendum on the subject. A Gallup Poll taken in June 1977 had revealed that more than 70 percent of Quebecers continued to be opposed to any idea of separation or independence for Quebec. The premier thus asked his people whether he might have a mandate merely to discuss with the federal government the possibility of what he called 'sovereignty association', a status which he described to mean political independence, but continued economic integration with Canada.

Such a 'mandate' was hardly necessary, because any provincial government already had the power to discuss any issue it wished with the federal government. The federal government, however, became

convinced that a positive vote encouraging negotiations for sovereignty association would be declared by the Parti Québécois, if such negotiations broke down, to be a mandate for a unilateral declaration of independence. Federal spokesmen decided to enter the fray of the pre-referendum campaign. It was indeed, they declared, time for constitutional change, and in particular for the consolidation of French-Canadian rights, including rights for French-Canadians to be provided with education at state expense in their own language anywhere in Canada. But it was not the time, they maintained, nor was there the need, for Quebec to try to go it alone.

The referendum result, by a margin of 60 to 40, was a denial by Quebecers of permission to their government even to discuss any idea of 'sovereignty association' with the federal government.

The federal government now considered itself committed to early action on constitutional change; a first requirement of which was to create a system for amending the constitution in Canada. That summer Ottawa and the provincial governments had a series of meetings, culminating in a major conference held in September, in one last attempt to negotiate an agreement on 'patriation'. The battle lines were so firmly drawn that the federal government made contingency plans for failure. Listing these plans in a confidential memorandum, a copy of which subsequently fell into the hands of provincial leaders, polarised positions further. Nevertheless, the largest province, Ontario (with 36 percent of the Canadian population) and New Brunswick (a province which is 40 percent French-speaking and the most enthusiastic exponent of bilingualism) aligned themselves with the federal government, leaving eight provinces in opposition.

The Minister of Justice, Jean Chrétien, introduced a resolution in the House of Commons asking the British Parliament to provide for patriation, for the adoption of an amending formula and for the entrenchment of a Charter of Rights and of the principle of equalization. A special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons considered the resolution, and after several months of examination and debate, and many significant changes, it was adopted.

The federal government made clear its intention to carry the resolution to Westminster, even though eight of the ten provincial governments remained opposed. There was, however, the question of whether such near-unilateral action would be legal, and six provinces took the matter to court, saying it would not be.



Minister of Justice Jean Chrétien being interviewed by the press after the adoption of his resolution to the British Parliament had been passed by the Canadian House of Commons.