

NOTES FOR A SPEECH
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A) INTRODUCTION

In recent months you have kindly and patiently heard out Quebecers explain their view of the referendum debate in Québec.

Since those speakers are the leaders of the <yes> and the <no> forces, you have now a fairly good idea of the tone of the campaign and of the strategies of each camp. You have heard it from the horses' mouths...

I do not claim to have the prestige of my predecessors at this tribune. But I have an edge. I am not a politician.

I won't criticize these men and women who have chosen a life of public service. But there is one thing we can hardly expect from a politician in the middle of a campaign, it is to be objective.

I have nothing to sell and I am not hustling for votes, so I can try, to the best of my ability, to give an honest overview of the issues. *La Presse*, of which I am the Editorialist-in-Chief, is the only French daily philosophically opposed to the Parti Québécois sovereigntist project.

I am not neutral, but this editorial stand puts me in what one might call the "hot seat" because it is my job, and not always an easy one, to defend a position that is not shared by all of our readers. I am therefore in the eye of the storm, and I must, day after day, weight the two points of view that are dividing the Québec society.

From this privileged post, I bring you today two observations.

The first is that we can be practically certain that the referendum will not lead to Québec's separation.

But the second is that the referendum will not, in fact, resolve anything; the day after the vote, the Québec problem - which is also a Canadian problem, thus our problem, will remain in its entirety.

Instead of focusing on the debate itself, whose outcome is almost settled, we should rather be already thinking about what happens after the referendum and look for more lasting solutions to avoid this perpetual and costly psychodrama.

B) THE CRYSTAL BALL

Let's look, for a moment, at our crystal ball. The more than probable outcome of the referendum is a victory of the "No" and a rejection of the Parti Québécois proposal.

Of course, it is hazardous to predict any political events. But if most pollsters and most analysts have come to the conclusion that M. Parizeau cannot win this referendum, it is because they refer to some basic trends.

The Québec electorate has consistently opposed sovereignty with a majority ranging from 15 to 20 percent. Among the voters, only Francophones are tempted by the idea of separation, and this vote is, roughly, evenly split. This tendency could be seen at work again in the recent Québec elections where the Parti Québécois managed to obtain only 44 percent of the vote with a refurbished good-government platform.

It is true that support for sovereignty has fluctuated in the past, as is the case with most debates of a political nature. After the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, the sovereigntist option had an intense but brief moment of glory when support exceeded sixty percent for a few months. Obviously, this is the momentum PQ strategists are trying to recapture.

Since the elections, the P.Q. Government has had some moment of success, and the <Yes> camp made up some yardage. But not enough to edge out the no's who still lead with a 55-45 margin.

In my opinion, the factors presently sustaining the <Yes> forces have little to do with Quebecers' constitutional convictions. The Parizeau government was on home ice when it unveiled its referendum strategy, it was still enjoying the post-electoral honeymoon, and finally, it benefitted from the disorganization of the federalists who are still looking for cohesion, for a leader and for a message.

But this will not last, because the reorganization of the <No> forces will bring the normal balance of power back to the debate. And sooner or later, in spite of Mr. Parizeau's desperate efforts, the debate will have to focus on his sovereignty project.

Curiously enough, even if the Québec crisis seems to be an unending drama, this will be the first time in fifteen years where Quebecers will discuss sovereignty.

For years, the sovereigntists have been making electoral breakthroughs by betting on constitutional discontent without ever having to subject their own proposal to a reality check. In 1992, during the Charlottetown Accord referendum, sovereigntist forces convinced voters that the debate should only be about the accord. In 1993, during the federal elections, the Bloc Québécois convinced Quebecers that the most important thing was to give Québec a voice. During the last provincial elections, P.Q. party leader Jacques Parizeau declared that a vote for him, was first and foremost, a vote for good government.

Now the time has come. The referendum question, despite all its flaws, is about sovereignty and will focus the debate on the Parti Québécois' proposal.

This debate will surely dissipate astonishing illusions people still have. For example, in December, a survey uncovered some curious results. To the following question: "In your opinion, would a sovereign Québec still be part of Canada", only 50 percent of the French speaking respondents answered <No>; 32 percent of them thought that a sovereign Québec would be part of Canada and 18 percent did not know.

But most of all, the debate will force pequists to face issues they so elegantly managed to avoid, the risks associated with sovereignty and importantly the cost of separation.

My feeling is that a discussion of those issues will reestablish the natural balance between the two main political trends.

C) THE SCENARIOS

This obviously does not rule out quirky rebounds and surprises. But it remains true that one scenario can be formally ruled out: a clear victory for independence.

The future can thus be reduced to three possible scenarios.

The high probability scenario is that the <No> will win, with perhaps a slighter margin than in 1980 due to the scars left by the failure of constitutional reforms.

The second, improbable, scenario is that the "Yes" will win by a very narrow margin. It is unlikely, but still possible, if a surge in public opinion at the right time enables the sovereigntist proposal to squeak through. But a weak <Yes> grudgingly given by a divided people under unstable conditions would not constitute a mandate for separation, and it would probably not force the Rest of Canada to compel. But it would create a dramatic political social increased economical crisis.

There is a third scenario. The Parti Québécois, faced with the predictable outcome of the referendum, could change the formulation of the referendum question for a less radical one in order to get a <yes>. In such a case, the PQ would win, but would not have the required mandate to trigger the process of achieving sovereignty.

These three scenarios that describe the possible outcomes, have two points in common. None of them will lead to sovereignty. But none of them will close off the constitutional debate.

But do not deceive yourselves about the meaning of a victory of the no side. Do not indulge yourselves in believing that it will solve the Québec problem or put it on the ice for a few years. Most voters in Québec will be unhappy, the sovereigntists because they didn't succeed and the federalist because they will still be deeply dissatisfied with the Canada as it is what they call the status quo.

D) UNDERSTANDING QUÉBEC

Status quo. This is an expression you will hear about again and again. Mr Daniel Johnson, when he came here, talked about it. What do Quebecers mean by the status quo and why do they hate it so much ?

This is something we have to understand if we are to search for more lasting solutions to the Canadian crisis.

To do so, we must take into account the major changes that have taken place in Québec during the last quarter century.

I will not do a <Battle of the Plains of Abraham> routine, nor enumerate the long list of Québec's "grievances".

I personally believe that we are too often prisoners of history. I would, however, note that the persistence of these old quarrels, inherited from adversarial relationships of centuries past, is not unusual. Other countries show us that two or three centuries are not enough to eradicate the scars left by wars and conquest.

To make a long story short, and to summarize four centuries in one sentence, our common history has left French Canadians with traces of resentment towards English Canadians, memories of injustices, a fear of vanishing as a French speaking nation in North America, and a lack of confidence in the ability of other provinces and the rest of Canada to protect them and represent them.

These traces of the past and this interpretation of history have not prevented most Francophones from being profoundly Canadian in their own fashion. For decades, describing themselves as French-Canadians, they tried to reconquer power from within. This is the reason why Canada has been governed almost uninterruptedly, for over a quarter century, by Quebecers. But now it's over.

In the last quarter of a century, a majority of Francophones in Québec have ceased to be French-Canadians and have become Quebecers.

This is not only a change in appellation. It means that if you ask Francophones in Québec to define themselves, a majority of them will say that they are Québécois rather than Canadians. It also means that all the trappings of nationalism, it means that their first allegiance goes for Québec. But even more significantly, it means that they increasingly regard Québec, if not necessarily as their country, at least at their homeland.

It does not mean that they want to leave Canada. On the contrary, most of them would like to stay in. But they believe that even if they remain part of the Confederation, the country is not their own.

They do not feel at home anywhere but in Quebec, do not recognize themselves in its debates, do not regard the other people of Canada as their fellow citizens, but more as their <friendly neighbours> .

I am not describing the separatist ideology, but the mainstream - the thoughts of a very large majority of the French-speaking population of Québec, irrespective of political and constitutional opinions.

Why such a change ? Why such an estrangement ? There are some economic reasons, the conjunction of the rise of the new Québec model and the failure of the old Canadian economy that convinced Québécois that they can do better. Demographic shifts in Canada, that lower Québec's weight and dilute the concept of the two founding nations, and political factors, the regrettable rapatriation of the constitution in 1982 without Quebec and the failures of attempted efforts at a constitutionnal reform that convinced Quebecers that Canada would never want to meet their needs.

In this perspective, status quo, which is the brand of federalism that triumphed during and after the Meech debate, is not sellable, because it will not give Québec the margin of freedom it wants for its economic and social policies, and because it will not give Québec the safeguards it wants for its language and culture.

E) THE QUÉBEC DREAM

Concretely speaking, the new definition of the Québec identity and the estrangement from Canada have made Quebecers push the concept of the two nations, always the basis of our understanding of the Canadian Confederation, to its outer limit.

Again, it does not mean the majority of Quebecers want to leave Canada - a Canada to which they are attached not only because of financial enticement, but also by a sense of history, continuity and pride.

But it has revealed itself in the desire to rapatriate as much power as possible to the provincial level, because the Québec government is seen as the most apt to develop Québec on the social, political and economical levels. In this context, manpower training has become a symbol on par with language and culture.

The common dream of Quebecers is a massive decentralization of power as expressed naïvely in the Allaire Report, for example, or in Robert Bourassa's superstructure concept, now being adopted by the young Mario Dumont, the leader of Québec's new third force, who wants to build on the Two-Nations thesis.

Under such a system, similar in structure to the European Community, Québec and Canada would be two countries, bound by a common structure and a common parliament and a common market.

The dream is to transform Québec into a new nation without separation and without a breakup. You would call it : having your cake and eating it too.

I would risk predicting, with a high degree of confidence, that if this option were feasible - if Canadians accepted such a proposal and were prepared to implement it, this proposal would easily be approved by a overwhelming majority of the citizens of Quebec.

Yet it is not feasible, not because it is a political or an economic nonsense. Europe is now being built in this way. But because it takes two to tango and that the rest of Canada would never accept a scheme where a province acquires the status of a state.

This gap between the Québec dream and the Canadian reality explains most of the apparent contradictions of Québec's political folklore: why they voted for Trudeau and Lévesque virtually at the same time, why the only time they were rallied in favour of sovereignty was when Mr Bourassa was the premier, why they voted for Lucien Bouchard but are satisfied with Jean Chrétien's performance, why they voted for Mr Parizeau without sanctioning his option.

F) A FAMILY QUARREL

This dream looms over the referendum campaign and explains a lot about the debate.

It is not a struggle between those who want to destroy Canada and those who want to build it. There are, of course, spitefull separatists who want to settle scores with the Conquerors, but they are very few. There are also federalists in the strictest sense of the term - people who see more in a federation than a convenient arrangement. This view played a major role in the 1980 referendum, but is now almost marginal.

The battle is waged between people on both sides who believe that Québec's development, security and growth will only be ensured if essential tools are in Québec hands. Basically, they want the same changes, but they are wondering whether they must be made from the inside or the outside.

The referendum battle is a family quarrel.

On one side, there are those who believe that Canada is so closed to change, so opposed to Québec's demands, that the only way to reach their objectives is to leave Confederation. On the other side are those who believe that in spite of obstacles, it is better to try again to change things from within Confederation and avoid the costs of separation.

There is a consensus on the goals, a consensus on rejecting the status quo, the present system, a consensus on the need to repatriate some powers. The only difference is about the means.

That is why what I am telling you today is, in many respects, very close to what the premier, Jacques Parizeau, told you two months ago. And yet, this is stated by someone who is considered by many Quebecers to be a hard-core federalist..

G) THE DEBATE

This fraternal dimension has an heavy impact on the campaign, It sets the tone, introduces a serious element of confusion, and define the issues.

A year ago, when the PQ victory was almost a sure outcome, many analysts, including myself, thought that for once, the referendum would lead to a clearcut debate. Mr Parizeau was clear about his option, and the federalist forces could not really propose another reform. It was straightforward: independance or status quo.

We were wrong. Basically, Quebecers do not accept to be forced into a clearcut choice that don't reflect their basic feelings. Most of them are not separatists, but they won't either accept federalism as it is. They want something that is somewhere in between. This ambivalence is more palpable with the 15 to 20 percent of undecided, who are unable to make up their minds between two options they don't like. The leaders of both camps are scrambling to seduce them.

That is why, in the last months, the pequists did their best not to talk about its option, which is impopular with the undecided.

They are instead trying to shift the debate on the flaws of federalism and sell the idea that a <no> vote means an approval of the unacceptable status quo, rather than a rejection of separation.

It forced the liberals to swear that they would never agree to this existing status quo and to pledge that a no vote was a yes to a renewed federalism. It is not by chance that Daniel Johnson insisted so much on change when he came here.

On the other hand, the liberals will insist heavily on the cost of separation and on its consequences.

This debate on costs will be very different from the one we had in 1980. The issues are not the same. We know now that some small countries, thanks to globalization, can prosper. We also know that, since the federal government is not as generous as it was, a Québec government could probably manage. Independence is, in the minds of most Québécois, feasible.

But other questions are arising, questions we would not have dreamed of twenty years ago. The most important of all questions that will loom over the whole debate, Canada's and Quebec's debt issues.

The sharing out of the national debt raises some very complex financial problems : how do you divide it, how do you convince nervous markets that they are not taking on an impossible risk, and what risk premiums would we be forced to pay.

This is where the real political problems begin. An independant Québec would certainly not enjoy the same degree of tolerance for its debt than Canada enjoys and would be probably forced by the markets to manage its debt more conservatively. In the case of separation, the Parizeau government, instead of implanting the Swedish model in North America, would be forced to implement the New-Zeland one.

But most of all, these issue of the debt refocuses the reflexion on the notions of state and nation. Coupled with globalization, indebtness has already forced nations to rethink themselves, to make do with less autonomy, to redefine the limits of their sovereignty, to discover that states have lost most of their traditionnal tools, wheter they are monetary, fiscal or commercial. All those very fondamental changes render the pequist dream of a small and hyperactive state not only impossible but also irrelevant.

H) English Canada's role

I have previously shocked many Canadians by telling them to intervene as little as possible. I know this seems terrible when you consider the extent to which both the other provinces and Quebec themselves would be affected by separation.

I have not changed my position, but I will express it a bit more delicately. The rest of Canada is not excluded from this public debate. But it cannot be very useful.

In most cases, efforts intended to convince Quebecers to vote no will be ineffective, for example, appeals to patriotism or to this country's values, or counter-productive, for example reminders that the rest of Canada would not allow an independant Québec to do business as usual.

It is already evident that the impact these arguments will depend on who uses them. The more the representatives of the <No> camp are perceived to be nationalists, the more credible and convincing their arguments will be.

But there is another reason. There will be little glory after the referendum. All the arguments that will have dominated the debate will be negative.

Some Quebecers will choose to stay in Canada because they cannot afford to leave. And others will accept to remain in this country only because they hope it will change.

The <no> side will win, with or without your help. You should keep your goodwill and your energies for the all important morning after when your contribution will be essential.

I) THE AFTERMATH

This is why Opposition leader Daniel Johnson, when he came here two weeks ago, almost implored you to show some willingness to change.

Allow me to add that, in my view, this openness, if there is any, should be expressed carefully. Promises of change in the mist of a referendum could lack credibility and introduce an element of confusion.

But I also know that the most predictable reaction of English Canada to such a perspective will be "Not again!". Enough is enough. Not the Québec problem all over. Not blackmail again. Why should we cave in to demands from Quebecers who again demonstrated their reluctance to act like good Canadians ?

Would it have been better to let them go, to have peace once and for all and never again be paralyzed by this endless debate ?

This is undoubtedly tempting, but you know that it is not be true. Arguments that are valid against separation are equally valid against expulsion.

We are stuck with each other, stuck in a country composed of a majority that is English speaking, and a minority that is French speaking. It is a pain in the neck for the majority - and a pain lower down for the minority. But we are bound by our history and now by our debt, and we might as well make the most of it.

It does not have to be painful and costly. On the contrary, the process of normalizing relations between Québec and Canada should not be seen as an obligation, but as an opportunity to solve in one stroke a whole constellation of major problems that are hindering Canada's development.

For the first time in decades, Canada is at a juncture where this change is possible. We are at a turning point where a solution to the Québec crisis would also resolve a greater Canadian crisis, that of a country on the edge of bankruptcy because of its inability to handle its finances.

The solution to this impasse seems to be increasingly evident, even to the Canadian Department of Finance and to not enough members of the federal cabinet, and it revolves around decentralization of federal activities and the return to the provinces of programs that provide services to the people.

On the financial level, decentralization would meet a threefold objective.

First of all, it would of course lower the deficit to a lower level by shoveling it off to the provinces.

Second, this process would give the responsibility for reducing expenditures and the deficit to those most likely to succeed.

The principle that says that services should be dispensed by the level of authority nearest to the customers also holds for expenditure controls.

Because they are closer to the citizens, the provinces can determine acceptable cutbacks with more nuance and take into account values that differ from one coast to the other.

Third, it would cut through the political impasse that has prevented Ottawa from solving the debt-deficit cunundrum. We have seen that some provinces can convince voters to accept significant cutbacks, in Alberta and New Brunswick, for instance, while these same citizens would react in a radically different manner if the cuts came from Ottawa. Federalism has generated a form of fiscal immaturity : most Canadians believe that somebody else should pay because somewhere in Canada, there is somebody richer than them. Decentralization would bring back a needed level of maturity.

This kind of reform, which reality will compel us to carry out sooner or later, is apt to affect not only social programs but also federal functions that duplicate provincial functions, such as energy and resources or regional economic development which will never succeed as long as it is managed by disconnected bureaucrats living in Ottawa.

We all know that such a process would also solve many of the issues at the heart of Québec's discontent by giving it a great part of the autonomy it wants. But it would solve it in an unusual manner.

It would not need a constitutionnal reform that nobody wants because it is it is time-consuming and it does not work. Most activities that the federal government would drop shoved already belong to the provinces.

We would simply rediscover the original division of powers. It would also not be seen as a hand-out to Québec, since many other provinces express similar concerns and that all provinces would have the same rights and the same responsibilities.

From a financial viewpoint, this change is inevitable and essential if Canada wishes to survive more or less intact beyond the millennium.

It is also this perspective that allows many Quebecers and Canadians to believe that a renewed Canadian federalism is still possible. That we can hope for an evolution of the federation without hitting a wall like we did with Meech or Charlottetown. This is what allows us to believe that Canada can change and that Québec has its place in it.

I will not hide the fact that for many Quebecers, like Mr Johnson, whose political future will rely on his capacity to renew federalism, this perspective of a fiscal and financial revolution inside Canada is not only a godsend but an absolute necessity.

J) UNE CONCLUSION PESSIMISTE

The point that we will be raised in Québec is the following. Are we displaying too much naivety, too much complacency ? Are we betting on an evolution of federalism whose outcome is far from certain ?

Those are question we should ask ourselves. This renewal of the federation is an answer to an inescapable financial crisis. It is a logical and sound approach to a very dramatic problem. But is Canada capable of sound reasoning ?

The constitutional debates have shown that Quebecers and other Canadians share a common characteristic - an attachment to outdated symbols that reinforce the inflexibility of our institutions and limit our capacity for change. Quebecers are often times paranoïd and pompous in their nationalism. But Canadians are also more than capable of puting principles above common sense.

Most countries react to certain triggers: Americans act accordingly to their interest of a super-nation, French believe in the superior interest of the nation. Canada, and mostly english Canada, likes to be governed by its principles.

The best example is the failure to sign the Meech Lake Accord. By not giving in on obscure points of law, they opened the door to the process resulting in my presence here, tonight.

And other principles, as noble and as dusty, may stop a much awaited governemental reform.

The Canada we have built tends to define itself in terms of a social security net that distinguishes it from the United States. This presents a tremendous problem because Canada is without a doubt the only country on earth whose identity is defined by the expenditures of its government and the number of its civil servants.

This puts us in a very delicate position where each governmental decision to resolve its financial problems is seen as a gesture that will destroy the country and its identity.

It introduces elements of rigidity that hinders most attempts at change. For example, Canada is, at my knowledge, the only industrialised country where the health system is defined by five non-negotiable and sacred principles.

All the great forces that were at work to give us those monuments will be at work to oppose changes that would probably destroy many aspects of our brand of welfare state.

I do believe that it would be suicidal not to move. This would precipitate a financial crisis and probably trigger a new Québec crisis where sovereigntist would have a new sales pitch.

But is it possible to think that Canada can be suicidal, that it does not have the ability or the reflexes to do what is needed to secure its survival ? That it could be ready to compromise its survival to safeguard some principles ?

I know some will say that it is not of good taste to close remarks on such a pessimistic note, but there it is. Is it possible that Canadians, unable to change and to solve their problems, would rather sink than change ? This is the real challenge that faces us all.

Thank you !