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# Why we are Sovereigntists

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by Hon. Lucien Bouchard, M.P.

*One major change in the House of Commons following the October 25 election is the presence of 54 members of the Bloc Québécois dedicated to the attainment of independence for Quebec. Enough members of the Bloc were elected to form the Official Opposition in the 35th Parliament. In this article the Leader of the Bloc outlines why he and his colleagues support sovereignty. The article is a condensed version of a speech in the House of Commons on January 1994.*

**M**any in English Canada were surprised by the Bloc Québécois's achievement on October 25. The channels of communication from Quebec to English Canada are significantly distorted as they cross the border. The Quebec reality is perceived in a very confused way on the other side. That is a first justification for the presence of Quebec sovereigntists in this House.

Institutions often lag behind reality. The previous House of Commons was no exception. The stinging rejection of the Charlottetown Accord by voters in Canada and Quebec is striking proof. Today, the main architects of that accord have all disappeared from the political scene. The voters have set the record straight. For the first time in contemporary history, this House which is now beginning its work reflects the very essence of Canada, its binational nature and the very different visions of the future which flow from that. Truth is never a bad advisor. As General de Gaulle said, one may well long for the days of sailing ships, but the only valid policy one can have is based on realities.

What are the realities with which this House will be faced? First of all, a singularly bad economic situation. One of the most obvious, if not spectacular, signs of this

is the chronic inability of federal governments to control the budget deficit and the enormous resulting debt. It seems that this voracious monster can at will, take its toll in terms of jobs, of the minimal security of the poor, of the financial health of the federal State, and even of the future of our young people. Not only have those deficits been relentless for the past 18 years, but this year's, which stands at some \$43 billion confirms that the system is totally out of order.

In order to get out of this mess, it will not be enough to blame the previous government. In any case, Canadians have already said what they thought of its performance. The ineffectiveness inherent to the system cannot escape the scrutiny of an observer who does not bury his head in the sand.

One only has to look at the relative performance of the various countries subject to an identical international environment. This is a sure criteria, since everybody is facing the same economic problems and requirements. Therefore, the global context does not justify Canada's mediocre performance in terms of productivity since 1979, the worst of all OECD countries, nor the persistence of such a high unemployment level, nor the uncontrolled growth of the debt. Canada is also in first place in terms of relying on foreign investors, since 40 per cent of its debt is owed to foreign interests.

Be that as it may, it is not free trade agreements, global markets, or the requirements imposed by the competitiveness of the world markets which, in the last few decades, have forced the federal government to embark

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on all kinds of programs and expenditures, to encroach upon provincial jurisdictions, and to create a tentacular bureaucracy. Rather, this extravagance and this inconsistency were motivated by a triple internal concern: to give to the federal government a legitimacy snatched from the provinces: to affirm its role of strong central government; and to contain the centrifugal forces of the structure. It is our political structures which are called into question when we wonder why we have become the most over-governed country in the Western world, with 11 governments for a population of 28 million people.

We only have ourselves to blame if overlapping federal and provincial activities prevent the creation of cohesive programs and generate an outrageous amount of waste in human and financial resources. That reveals a second reality as inescapable as the economic crisis. Such inefficiencies are at the very heart of our system. They constantly affect each other and reflect the vicious circle of Canadian federalism. At the core of the economic crisis is a political crisis.

But for the better part of English Canada, there is no political crisis. Or, if there is one, they choose to ignore it. They have sent to Ottawa a new government with the mandate to better manage the present system without changing anything in it.

On the other hand, Quebecers not only sent a completely new team to Ottawa, but they gave their elected representatives the mandate to get prepared to bring about a new order. The Bloc Québécois was given a double mission: to manage the economic crisis and to handle the political crisis. Does the distribution of elected members in this House not prove the very existence of this second crisis?

More than 30 years ago Quebec awakened to the world and decided to catch up. The Quiet Revolution transformed Quebec. It did not take long before the spirit of reform in Quebec collided with the spirit of Canadian federalism in Ottawa. Thirty years ago the horns were locked. Thirty years later we are still at it, as if frozen in a time warp. We should learn from the past, and this we should have learned: The political problem with Canada is Quebec, and the problem of Quebec is Canada.

That many Canadians refuse to acknowledge the problem only serves to compound it. For example, the Bloc Québécois has been on the federal scene for more than three years, but until recently we were ranked alongside the bizarre and the outer fringes.

Our aim, of course, is not to win popularity contests in English Canada, but you have here in a nugget the essence of the political predicament which bedevils Canada. A new political party which had led systematically in the polls in Quebec for three years was regularly

dismissed as a quirk on the charts or a manifestation of a temporary leave of the senses.

Some are willing to deny the obvious in order not to upset the status quo. They speak of one Canadian nation, whereas Quebec and English Canada are two different nations. Even when nobody in Quebec was contemplating sovereignty, the Canada that steered Quebecers was not of the same cloth as the Canada that seized the minds and hearts of Maritimers, Ontarians or Westerners. Quebecers were in the vanguard of the struggle for more Canadian autonomy under the Red Ensign and eventually for the political independence of Canada. This tends to be forgotten in certain quarters where Quebec bashing is a popular pastime.

***Hugh MacLennan's powerful novel  
Two Solitudes was published in 1945.  
Half a century later the title still  
mirrors the political landscape.***

Canada and Quebec have both changed tremendously in the last 100 years, but they are travelling on parallel tracks and remain as different today as they were yesterday. By and large they both continue to ignore the history and the culture of the other. This is no accident: language, geography and history largely account for it.

Quebecers do not deny that English Canada constitutes a nation in its own right with its own sense of community. Every single poll in the last few years has shown that the vast majority of the people in each of the nine provinces want to remain politically united after Quebec becomes sovereign. This small detail is conveniently neglected by all those who question the existence of an English Canada on the shaky basis of regional differences.

In France the people of the north are certainly as different, if not more so, from the people of the south as Maritimers are from the people of British Columbia. But they both feel a strong attachment to France, or to Canada.

In fact, by clinging to the one nation thesis, English Canada is running the risk of undermining itself. As Kenneth McRoberts, the political scientist from York University, wrote in 1991: "In its effort to deny Quebec's distinctiveness, English Canada has been led to deny its own".

If one accepts the obvious, one must surely accept the consequences. Every nation has the right to self-government, that is to decide its own policies and future. We have no quarrel with the concept of federalism when applied to uninational states. It is a different matter when

it come to multinational states, particularly to the Canadian brand of federalism.

Canadian federalism means that the government of Quebec is subordinate to the central government both in large and lesser matters. Within the federal regime, English Canada in fact has a veto on the future development of Quebec.

When the theme of national sovereignty is brought up in English Canada a nice paradox almost always emerges. I shall call it the paradox of English Canada. First, the tendency to consider passé the concept of national sovereignty, what with the European Community, GATT, NAFTA and so on. This is a patent misreading of the situation. Take a look at the western world. Ninety-five per cent of its population live in nation states.

The fact is that Quebec is the only nation of more than seven million people in the western world not to have attained political sovereignty. I invite members of this House to reflect upon this. As a political structure Canada is the exception rather than the rule, an exception that is not working well, to understate the case.

The particular situation of Quebec was inadvertently recognized by a member of the Canadian delegation to the final GATT negotiations in mid-December. As will be recalled, Canada was seeking to be exempted from the clause attacking subsidies by sub-national governments because, in his words: "There is only one Quebec". He was right of course.

Let us ask ourselves: Who was in the driver's seat during the European revolution of 1989-90 which saw German reunification and the accession to political sovereignty of so many nations in central and eastern Europe? Was it the supranational institutions, the EC, NATO, the Warsaw pact, or was it the different nations, each one of them seizing the chance of a lifetime? In short, Quebecers aspire to what is considered normal in the western world.

The paradox of English Canada pops up with the second part of the discussion about national sovereignty, the part that deals with the issue of Canadian sovereignty. A large part of the free trade election of November 1988 was spent, in English Canada, on the impact of the free trade agreement on the sovereignty of Canada. Everybody agreed that this was something important that should not be tampered with. If Canada's political sovereignty vis-à-vis the USA is valuable and must be preserved, why is it that Quebec's political sovereignty vis-à-vis Canada is depicted as irrational in the anglophone media of the land? When the preceding Prime Minister said that she preserved Canadian sovereignty during the last stage of the NAFTA negotiations, why is it that nobody rolled their eyes and derided this quaint idea of sovereignty? What mysterious alchemy trans-

forms the quality of a concept according to the people to whom it applies or according to the year of accession to sovereignty? One must not forget that independent nations are not born. They are made.

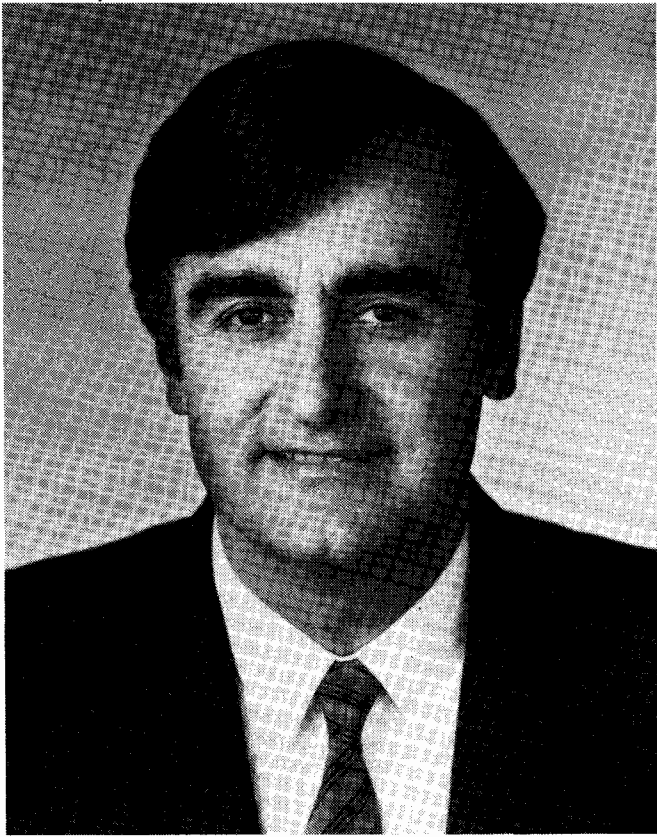
***All this does not prevent Canadians and Quebecers from having quite a few things in common: a respect for democracy; a large degree of openness to people of other cultures; and a fascination with our neighbours south of the border. They both love their country. The problem is and has been for a very long time; that it is not the same country....***

By its presence and actions in this House, the Bloc Québécois will be doing every Quebecer and Canadian a service by preventing them from going back to square one. Now that the Meech and Charlottetown accords have stripped the varnish of political correctness off the Canadian federal system, revealing its obstinate fixedness, everyone is immune to promises of renewal. So much so that nobody dares make any, not even to score political points.

Thus we should be able to make in the clear light of day the decision we are supposed to make by referendum in Quebec. We are left with only two choices: either we settle for the status quo that almost every federalist in Quebec since Jean Lesage has denounced or, the alternative is clear. Quebec attains full powers to assume full responsibility.

This imposes upon us a basic civic duty, which consists in sparing ourselves three more decades of fruitless discussion, endless trials and lost illusions. This waste of resources, this dilution of collective hope, this misuse of our energy has been going on for too long already. All we have to show today despite the best wills in Quebec and English Canada is bitterness, suspicion, lack of understanding and a profound collective loss of affection. We are about to lose even the will to face reality squarely.

More importantly, there is the waste of time. I am not only referring to that of the people who, in the excitement of the sixties, dreamed of solving our conflicts and building in Quebec and Canada societies that would be tolerant, imaginative, open to the world and concerned with social justice. I am thinking of our two nations in particular. Because time is running out for them too. While we are moping around, the world is coming apart and rebuilding around us. The boat is going by and we are missing it.



**Hon. Lucien Bouchard**

Whether we like it or not, there will be a debate on our political future, and it will take place right here. The government is free to immerse itself in silence as it has been the practice in this House with regard to the sovereigntist aspirations of so many Quebecers. Is it out of fear or powerlessness that they are evading subjects that put into question the old political structures of Quebec and Canada as well as their capacity to solve social and economic problems? Whether fainthearted or resigned, this total silence is irresponsible and leads to paralysis. The Bloc Québécois has been sent here precisely to break this conspiracy of silence.

We will not be afraid to point out that Quebecers are and will always be in a clear minority position within the federal system. The population ratio is three to one. We can fool ourselves and believe that we can determine the course of events despite this ever-present handicap which relegates Quebec to second-place status when interests diverge. This would imply constant tension and a superior performance on our part. In other words, utopia.

Quebec sovereigntists advocate a modern concept of political sovereignty, one which is exercised within the framework of major economic structures and which is

respectful of minorities. Under no circumstances will the 630,000 francophones outside Quebec be sacrificed. Moreover, Quebec sovereigntists were not the ones who rejected the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and NAFTA. There is a difference between withdrawing into oneself and pulling out in order to perform better in the new global economy.

The close economic integration between Quebec and Canada forces us to take a careful look at what is happening in Europe. What lessons can we draw from the European model?

Some pundits like to believe the European Community will gradually transform itself into something resembling Canadian federalism, and use this as an argument against Quebec sovereignty. Thus they reveal their lack of familiarity with European developments. In fact the other way around appears much more likely. To solve the Canadian political crisis our present institutions should evolve along the lines of the European Community.

A few facts seem in order. The European Commission in Brussels has a budget that amounts to 1.2 per cent of the global GNP of the community. It has no fiscal powers and cannot run a deficit. The federal government in Ottawa spends 22 per cent of GNP and has the whole gamut of fiscal powers. As for deficits we all know what has happened. The commission in Brussels has no army, no police, and a small bureaucracy when compared to national governments. Community decisions are in fact executed by national bureaucracies. If we exclude trade matters, national sovereignty remains the basic ingredient of the community.

For instance the 12 members could modify the structure and the workings of the EC without the commission having any say in the decision. For these countries co-operation is the master word, not subordination.

This is a far cry from the Canadian brand of federalism. Who will pretend, for example, that only the provincial governments determine the future of Canada? Who will pretend that the federal government is but a benevolent arbitrator of inter-regional conflicts? For Quebec, the central government is the problem. For English Canada, it is part of the solution.

The Maastricht treaty extended the process of economic integration to the field of monetary policy by setting the objective of a common currency before the end of the century, and the process of political co-operation by specifying the objective of a common thread in the fields of defence and foreign policy. These sensitive fields will remain the prerogative of the heads of state assembled in the European Council.

Hence the following question: If the European union is indeed the wave of the future as is frequently alleged

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in the Canadian media, why not propose this model as a solution to Canada's national problem? If Maastricht represents the embodiment of the next century, why does English Canada not propose the same kind of arrangement to Quebec? The Maastricht arrangements would be much easier to implement between Quebec and Canada than among 12 very diverse countries.

Let there be no mistake. Bloc members will not forget that their commitment to sovereignty constitutes the real reason for their presence in this House. One could say that as far as we are concerned, the pre-referendum campaign has begun. Meanwhile, we will not let the recession be dissociated from its causes.

For the time being, and until Quebecers have made their decision in a referendum, members of the Bloc will seek to safeguard the future by averting present evils to the best of their ability. These evils include unemployment, poverty, lack of budgetary restraint, undue duplication, threats to our social programs, fiscal inequity and loss of confidence in our political institutions and leaders.

All these issues have a direct impact on Quebec's interests but are equally important for the rest of Canada. Our aspirations drive us apart, but our social, economic and budgetary problems are the same.

Who can challenge the legitimacy of any action the Bloc may take to limit the damage, create jobs, wrestle with

the deficit and fight off attacks against our social programs? The universal character of these concerns confers a clear legitimacy on a common response to these issues. In addition, we received an electoral mandate.

I can already hear our opponents claiming that it was only thanks to an erratic division of seats of English Canada between the Liberals and Reform members that the Bloc was able to come to the fore with the second largest number of members. However, the impact of spoilers and how this translates to the electoral map is also an expression of the will of the electorate. It was a combination of all votes, whether they were from Quebec or the rest of Canada, which made us the Official Opposition. To criticise the fact that this responsibility has now been taken over by the Bloc Québécois shows a lack of respect for the democratic process as a whole.

We intend to take these responsibilities seriously; and we will do so loyally, correctly and with due resolve. We know that is what Quebecers expect us to do, and they would never forgive us if we deviated from this path.

