

So Near and Yet So Far: The 1995 Quebec Referendum in Perspective

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Abstract

Pierre Trudeau and Brian Mulroney failed to reconcile Quebec with the rest of Canada. The *Parti Québécois* (PQ) government under Jacques Parizeau called a referendum in October 1995 to decide if the province would secede. While the federal government under Jean Chrétien barely intervened, the fiery rhetoric of Lucien Bouchard brought the separatists close to victory. Quebecers voted to stay in Canada by only 1 per cent. A massive late rally of non-Quebec Canadians pleading with Quebecers to remain probably tipped the balance. Bouchard, who succeeded Parizeau, never felt confident of winning another referendum. Later the PQ lost ground as separatism ceased to appeal. In the EU referendum of 2016 the British government failed to learn from Canada's experience. The Remain side campaigned negatively rather than positively, and did not mobilize its supporters as well as the Leave camp did. Canadian comparisons also remain relevant for Scotland.

Introduction

On Monday 30 October 1995, the people of Quebec voted in a referendum on whether to remain part of Canada. The turnout was extremely high, at 93 per cent. 49.4 per cent voted Yes, i.e. to separate; 50.6 per cent voted No. Quebecers decided to stay in Canada by a margin of barely one per cent. Yet over 20 years later, Canada is still united.

In this article I will examine how this referendum happened, as the third in a series; how it produced this result; and why it has not

been repeated.¹ In my conclusion I shall explore parallels with referenda taking place in the United Kingdom: on independence for Scotland and on membership of the European Union. I have drawn on my experience as British High Commissioner to Canada from 1992 to 1996.² I have also had great help from two former colleagues: Ivor Rawlinson, then Consul-General in Montreal; and Patrick Holdich, then head of the Political Section at the High Commission in Ottawa, who later held the Montreal post also.

The first referendum of 1980: Trudeau and Lévesque

From its creation in 1867, the Dominion of Canada was a federation.³ It began with four founding provinces, which have now risen to ten together with three Arctic territories. In federations there is often a power struggle between the central government and the component provinces and usually rivalry among provinces as well. In Canada, Quebec asserted itself in both respects. This was because of its long-standing French legacy of history, language, law and culture, which defined its identity.⁴

Yet by the twentieth century Quebec had also become an economic powerhouse, centred on the cosmopolitan city of Montreal. Many large Canadian firms were based there and the city hosted the World's Fair in 1967 and the Olympic Games in 1976. This prosperity attracted English speakers to the province in increasing numbers, which challenged its francophone traditions. A movement emerged which argued that Quebec could only preserve its identity if it separated itself from the rest of Canada. This movement profited from the vacuum left by the decline of the Roman Catholic Church, the historic foundation of Quebec.

Separatism was manifested in various ways. French President Charles de Gaulle, when he visited Montreal in 1967, famously cried out 'Vive le Québec libre!'⁵ In 1970 a terrorist group, the *Front de Libération de Québec* (FLQ), kidnapped James Cross, the British Trade Commissioner, and Pierre Laporte, a Quebec minister. Cross was released, but Laporte was murdered. Pierre Trudeau, recently elected as Canadian Prime Minister, invoked federal emergency laws and applied them with extreme rigour.⁶ Yet the most lasting sign was the formation of the *Parti Québécois* (PQ) in 1968, led by René Lévesque, with Jacques Parizeau as a founder member. The goal of the PQ was Quebec sovereignty. This meant separating Quebec from the rest of Canada, though without necessarily going as far as complete independence.⁷

In 1976 the PQ won the provincial election, defeating the Quebec Liberal Party under Robert Bourassa. Thereafter, PQ and Liberals alternated in power at intervals of exactly nine years, up until 2012. Lévesque, as premier, invited Quebecers to vote for 'sovereignty-association' in a referendum in May 1980, the first of the three. Despite – or perhaps because of – the ambiguity of the new status proposed for Quebec, it was rejected by 60 per cent against 40 per cent, on an 86 per cent turnout. Even so, Quebec suffered economic damage, as big firms moved away and outside investment dried up.⁸ Lévesque never contemplated another referendum and the PQ lost power in 1985. The matter might have rested there, except for Trudeau's intervention.

Trudeau, himself a Quebecer, was a conviction politician, combative and single-minded.⁹ Returned to power early in 1980, he resolved to unify Canada by amending the constitution. He put his justice minister, another Quebecer called Jean Chrétien, in charge of the process. In a speech just before the referendum Trudeau promised Quebecers that if they rejected sovereignty, they would benefit from his constitutional reforms.¹⁰ These reforms introduced a new Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which provided that all Canadians should have access to education in both English and French. But education was a provincial responsibility and Quebec law required public education to be conducted in French. Quebecers felt betrayed by Trudeau. After other provinces were reluctantly brought to accept Trudeau's reforms, Lévesque still held out against them. He mounted a legal challenge to the Constitution Act of 1982, without success. The Act became law, but Quebec refused to ratify it.¹¹ Trudeau had sought to unify Canada, but ended by increasing tension between Quebec and the rest.

The second referendum of 1992: Mulroney and Bourassa

After Trudeau retired from politics, the federal election of 1984 was won by the Conservatives, led by Brian Mulroney, another Quebecer though of Irish ancestry. He campaigned on a promise to reconcile Quebec to the rest of Canada, which gained him many seats in the province. In provincial elections the Quebec Liberals defeated the PQ and Robert Bourassa returned to office.

I never saw Trudeau in action, but I observed Mulroney at close quarters. He was a dealmaker and conciliator, who used his Irish charm to win people round.¹² He encouraged Bourassa to devise constitutional formulae that would respond to Quebec's needs. These

were put to the provincial premiers as part of a new settlement, the Meech Lake Accord of 1987. The key provisions were: Quebec was recognized as 'a distinct society'; more powers were transferred to the provinces; and future constitutional amendments would require the assent of all provinces.

Meech Lake was welcomed in Quebec. It was accepted by the federal Liberals, though not by Trudeau and Chrétien, and it found favour with public opinion. Since it changed the amending formula of the constitution, it had to be ratified by all provincial legislatures within three years. With time, however, opinion in the rest of Canada turned against the accord, which was thought to give unfair privileges to Quebec. As the deadline approached, two provinces failed to adopt it. Time ran out and the Meech Lake Accord lapsed in 1990.¹³

Quebec saw this as a cruel rejection by the rest of Canada and separatist sentiments were revived. Bourassa felt obliged to promise a referendum on Quebec's future in Canada by October 1992, unless a better constitutional offer was available. This encouraged Mulroney to try again, but conditions were now less favourable. Other provinces had their own demands, while the aboriginal peoples sought recognition. Canadians in general were tired of constitutional rounds and wanted more attention to economic issues. Mounting public debt had obliged Mulroney to cut back public spending and raise taxes, which was not well received.

Mulroney's second attempt reached its climax in the summer of 1992. A conference of federal and provincial ministers was hard at work when the Queen came to Ottawa for Canada Day on 1 July, to mark the 125th anniversary of Confederation. I had just arrived as High Commissioner and I heard her publicly urge the parties to agree. Sure enough, a deal was struck, so that a meeting between Prime Minister Mulroney, Quebec Premier Bourassa and all the other provincial premiers was fixed for late August in Prince Edward Island. There they formally endorsed the Charlottetown Accord.

This was a clumsier package than Meech Lake. As before, Quebec would be recognized as a distinct society; more powers were shifted away from the centre; and constitutional amendments required agreement by all provinces. In addition, the federal Senate would have a new method of selection; the aboriginal peoples would move towards self-government; and sundry new rights and freedoms were introduced. This complex deal was accepted by the federal and all provincial governments: by the Liberal opposition, including Chrétien (now its leader) though not Trudeau; by the main aboriginal leaders; and by most of the media. I commended it to London. Mulroney

declared a nationwide referendum in October 1992, to meet Bourassa's deadline.

Canadian elites backed the Charlottetown Accord. But the Canadian people rejected it in this second referendum, by 54 per cent against 46 per cent with an average turnout of 72 per cent. The strongest rejection was in Western Canada, but it was also voted down in Quebec. This result reflected deep public frustration across the country. Canada was in a recession, which increased the pain of measures to correct the budget deficit. Canadians felt poor and put upon. They held Mulroney's government responsible and punished it by the means at hand.¹⁴

Charlottetown failed, just like Meech Lake. As before, this outcome boosted separatist feeling in Quebec. Mulroney, like Trudeau, had sought to unify Canada, but ended by increasing tension between Quebec and the rest.

The third referendum, October 1995: Chrétien, Parizeau and Bouchard

In 1993 Mulroney stepped down. The Conservatives went into federal elections, with uncertain prospects. The Canadian people punished them again and they were annihilated. They won only two seats, one being held in Quebec by Jean Charest. The Liberals came back into power, under Jean Chrétien as prime minister.

But the Liberals did not do well in Quebec. Most seats went instead to a new party, the *Bloc Québécois* (BQ), a federal manifestation of the provincial *Parti Québécois* (PQ). The BQ was founded and led by Lucien Bouchard, whom Mulroney had brought into politics as part of his campaign to reconcile Quebec.¹⁵ He had won a Conservative seat in Quebec and joined Mulroney's second cabinet. But after Meech Lake was rejected he broke with Mulroney and joined the separatist camp. His BQ profited from Quebecers' disgust at the failure of all Mulroney's policies and their mistrust of the Liberals and of Chrétien in person. They won so many seats as to be the second party in the federal parliament and form the official opposition. Many feared dire consequences, but in fact the BQ made little impact either in Ottawa or back in Quebec.¹⁶ Bouchard himself, however, gained much sympathy when he survived a near-fatal disease, at the cost of losing a leg.

The *Parti Québécois* returned to power in September 1994. Jacques Parizeau, the new premier, declared he would hold a referendum on

Quebec sovereignty within a year. Parizeau had an avuncular manner that concealed both a lively brain – he had a doctorate from the LSE – and a fierce political determination.¹⁷ When I first met him as premier, I told him my government wanted Canada to stay united. ‘I am not surprised’, he said with a smile.¹⁸ Parizeau intended Quebec to move directly to independence. He claimed it could still use the Canadian dollar, enjoy dual citizenship and be grandfathered in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He was convinced that Quebec would prosper in those conditions and commissioned economic studies to prove it, though he suppressed those that disagreed with him. In his view, there was no turning back if a majority voted for sovereignty. I was at a lunch in Ottawa with the European Union ambassadors where Parizeau insisted that Quebecers would then be ‘in a lobster pot’, from which they could not escape.¹⁹

However, not all of the PQ members were as militant as Parizeau. There was also a more moderate wing, led by Bouchard, who wanted the referendum to trigger negotiations with the federal government. After much debate, the party agreed to hold its referendum on Monday 30 October 1995, with a long question that combined both views:

Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign, after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the Bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?²⁰

The final phrase referred to a pledge that post-referendum negotiations must be complete within a year; Parizeau had insisted on this.

As the referendum approached, Daniel Johnson, who now led the Quebec Liberals, kept his head down, believing that the PQ would run themselves into the ground. On the federal government side, Chrétien wanted to avoid the mistakes made by Trudeau and Mulroney. He was a cautious but determined politician, who followed his instincts. He chose to adopt a low profile, convinced that the good sense of his fellow Quebecers would produce the right answer. In his memoirs Chrétien states that he ‘reluctantly went along’ with his advisers, who wanted him to limit his participation.²¹ But that was not how it looked at the time. Chrétien knew he was unpopular in Quebec because of his links with Trudeau and largely kept out of the province himself. He often clashed with Johnson, while insisting federal referendum strategy was only handled by Quebecers in his own entourage. Chrétien denied any role to people from elsewhere in Canada. He vetoed contingency

planning against a Yes vote, since this would suggest the federalists expected to lose.²²

For a long time this looked like the right strategy. Parizeau was not a good public advocate for his cause. He reassured committed separatists, but did not win over the undecided. Opinion polls showed support for Yes (i.e. separation) at barely 45 per cent in early October, a month before the vote. Then Parizeau handed over the campaign to Lucien Bouchard, which changed everything.

Bouchard had many assets.²³ As a moderate separatist, he believed many Quebecers were not ready for a single leap into independence; they would prefer a transitional process before they took this irrevocable step. This attitude brought into the separatist camp supporters of the small *Action Démocratique du Québec*, led by Mario Dumont.²⁴ Bouchard was personally popular in Quebec for breaking with Mulroney after Meech Lake. By surviving his deadly disease he had become a sort of secular saint. His widely reported remark to the surgeons during his amputation – ‘*Que l’on continue*’ (Keep going) – was taken as an appeal to the separatist camp.²⁵ Finally, he was a magnetic orator and attracted vast crowds to his public rallies. He captured people’s attention and won them to his side.

Opinion polls now moved rapidly in the separatists’ favour. With ten days to go they were showing the Yes side ahead, by 54 per cent to 46 per cent, having gained seven points in a week. When Paul Martin, the finance minister, spelt out publicly the economic drawbacks of separation, this was dismissed as scaremongering. The federal strategy was close to collapse and there was panic in Ottawa. Johnson appealed to Chrétien to reaffirm the pledges of constitutional change to benefit Quebec. Chrétien refused, but the press saw this as evidence of fatal disunity in the No camp.²⁶

Chrétien decided he must take over the campaign. He gave in to Johnson and, speaking in Montreal, promised ‘a new deal’ that would confirm Quebec as a distinct society and increase provincial powers. He also made two sombre appeals on television, in French and English.²⁷ Meanwhile, concern mounted all across the country. Chrétien’s ministers from outside Quebec, led by Brian Tobin, the fisheries minister from Newfoundland, could no longer endure the prospect of Canada coming apart. They overrode his order to keep silent and mounted a vast demonstration in Montreal, three days before the vote. This attracted a crowd over 100,000 strong and was attended by Chrétien, Johnson and four provincial premiers. The rally put over the message that the rest of Canada wanted Quebec to stay.²⁸

There were also some foreign interventions in the campaign. US President Bill Clinton, after meeting Chrétien in New York, declared at a press conference:

I can tell you that a strong and united Canada has been a wonderful partner for the United States ... I hope we'll be able to continue that.²⁹

He repeated the formula several times, without referring to a script. French President Jacques Chirac was more ambiguous when interviewed by Larry King for CNN. He said that France would not interfere; but if Quebec voted to separate 'of course we would recognise the fact'.³⁰ British Prime Minister John Major made no public statement (I had advised against one) but sent Chrétien a personal message of support just ahead of the vote. When I transmitted this, Chrétien told me the No camp was regaining lost ground and the Montreal rally had been a shot in the arm.³¹ But if Yes should win, he hoped the UK would still back the federal government.

On referendum day, Parizeau and Bouchard, convinced they would win, were drafting their victory speeches. By chance John Coles, the head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, was visiting Ottawa that day; after the polls closed we sat before the television in Earncliffe to watch the results come in, district by district.³² For some reason, the rural francophone districts reported first. Suspense grew as the Yes votes built up a dangerous lead. The Montreal results only began to come in after 10pm. The No votes inched up the dial to just past the total for Yes. The disappointment proved too hard for Parizeau to bear and he publicly blamed his defeat on 'money and the ethnic vote'.³³ He resigned at once as premier after this racist comment, as he had always intended to do if the vote went against him.

Causes and consequences

The next section of this article addresses three questions in turn:

- What would have happened if the Yes side had won?
- What caused the unusual result, with so large a turnout and so narrow a margin?
- Why has Quebec remained in Canada, after coming so close to leaving?

Consequences of a Yes vote

There has been much speculation about this.³⁴ I can record here what I thought would happen at the time. Chrétien had forbidden any contingency plans and later wrote: 'I did not debate – and will never debate – what I would have done if the Yes side had won.'³⁵ Nevertheless, he had left some clues. It looked as if he would keep Parizeau guessing as long as possible. He would contest the result and launch a legal challenge to it, especially if the margin was small. He would drag his feet over any negotiations. If Parizeau declared Quebec independent unilaterally, Chrétien would deny his right to break up Canada.³⁶

On his side, Parizeau had anticipated that Chrétien would play for time and had lined up measures designed to force his hand.³⁷ The Quebec provincial assembly would meet at once to endorse the referendum result. A supportive letter from local dignitaries would be published. Canadian soldiers stationed in Quebec would be invited to join the new Quebec army. Even before the vote all embassies in Ottawa were being lobbied to extend diplomatic recognition. Parizeau believed his trump card was a pledge by President Jacques Chirac that France would at once recognize Quebec as an independent state and encourage other francophone countries to do so.

When Parizeau visited France in January 1995, he had called on Chirac, then only Mayor of Paris. Chirac had said publicly that if Quebec voted to leave, France 'would stand by the Quebecois and support and recognise the new situation'.³⁸ Had he gone further in private, either then or later? My French contacts in Ottawa were nervous and so was Chrétien, as his memoirs reveal. Chirac was known to be impulsive, and relations between the two men were not good. Chrétien had publicly belittled Chirac's chances of being elected president in May; Chirac had tried to hijack the agenda of the Halifax G7 summit in June, so that Chrétien had to exert his authority from the chair.³⁹ Even so, since he became president, Chirac had been correct in public over Quebec, if not exactly helpful. If he had made any private pledges, these were never tested.

Reasons for the result

A month before the referendum it looked as if the Yes side were bound to lose, with polls giving them less than 45 per cent of the vote. Bouchard's rhetoric brought them to within a whisker of 50 per cent on the day,

while all the polls had forecast they would win. The turnout of 93 per cent was exceptional, even by Quebec standards. What can explain this result?

In my view the Yes side was indeed heading for victory, until events in the last few days brought out a late surge in No voters that the polls did not catch. Two events could have encouraged this: Chrétien's pledge of constitutional reforms; and the pro-Canada rally in Montreal. At the time I believed that Chrétien's move was decisive; I am now more sceptical. It was clearly an act of desperation, against his settled principles. After the event he carried out his promise without enthusiasm. Having sounded out Mike Harris, the new premier of Ontario, he concluded there would be no support for another constitutional round. He simply introduced a resolution in parliament to recognize Quebec as a distinct society and to give Quebec, Ontario, Atlantic Canada, the Prairie provinces and British Columbia each a veto on constitutional change.⁴⁰

At the time Daniel Johnson thought the Montreal rally made things worse; but Chrétien gave his consent for it to happen and welcomed it later.⁴¹ If it had really irritated Quebecers, the Yes vote would have been even larger than the polls forecast. I believe the demonstration provided something that had been missing till then. The campaigners on both sides had hitherto focused exclusively on what Quebecers would gain, or what they would lose, by *leaving* Canada. Until the Montreal rally, no one had shown Quebecers what they gained by *remaining* in Canada, as part of this wider community. The rally served to dramatize the choice facing Quebec. Its positive and emotional message might not have changed people's minds. But it encouraged those still undecided, who would have stayed at home, to turn out and vote No. These were just enough to tip the scale and produce the exceptional level of votes cast. Justin Trudeau, then a student at McGill University, now Canadian Prime Minister, was at the rally and reached similar conclusions. He felt it was a seminal event, whose impact outlasted the campaign, and provided 'an opportunity for Canadians to express their attachment to Quebec'.⁴²

Yet if the rest of Canada could produce so strong an impact, why did Chrétien exclude them from his campaign? I believe previous experience had made him mistrustful. Other provincial governments, after initial resistance, had left Quebec isolated in opposing Trudeau's constitutional reforms. Other provincial legislatures had frustrated Meech Lake, while the electorates of Western Canada had voted massively against Charlottetown. On each occasion Quebec had felt

rejected by the rest of Canada and support for separation had surged. This time Chrétien had wanted the Quebecers to make up their own minds, without any outside influences. In fact this played into the separatists' hands, with almost fatal results.

Why is Quebec still in Canada?

After the nail-biting referendum result, many observers thought Quebec was bound to leave Canada eventually. I believed at the time that the odds had now turned against Canada remaining united. Francophone Quebecers made up 80 per cent of the population and nearly 60 per cent of them had voted to separate. There had been a steady outflow of English speakers and other non-francophones since 1980 and this gathered speed right after the referendum. It looked as if demographic trends would deliver the province to the separatists in a few years' time. Yet even before I left Canada in February 1996 I was changing my mind.

One reason was voter fatigue. Lucien Bouchard quickly replaced Parizeau as Quebec premier. He was widely expected to call new elections, followed very soon by another referendum. But Bouchard did not want another referendum unless he knew he could win it. Quebecers had endured non-stop politics for four years – a referendum, federal elections, provincial elections and another referendum. He could not rely on them turning out again; they needed a rest.

Bouchard also wanted to delay until Quebec was strong enough to thrive on its own. Public finances in Canada, both federal and provincial, were heavily indebted. Paul Martin had imposed deep public spending cuts to balance the Canadian budget and reduce the burden of federal debt. Quebec had the largest provincial debt in relation to its size. Bouchard made the restoration of healthy finances and buoyant economic growth his first priority.

In the event, Bouchard never felt strong enough to launch another referendum, though he was re-elected in 1998. Nor did his successor Bernard Landry, a close ally of Parizeau. This was because Jean Charest, elected in 1993 as the sole federal Conservative in the province (and present at the Montreal rally), had become leader of the Quebec Liberals and revived their fortunes. In 2003, after the usual nine years in power, the PQ lost power to the Liberals and Charest took over as premier. This suggested that the Quebec population was no longer hooked on separation. Lucien Bouchard, who had sought to divide Canada, in fact ended by keeping Quebec within it.

In Ottawa Chrétien was sharply criticized for nearly allowing the break-up of Canada and was determined to make it harder for this to happen in future. He asked the Supreme Court to rule on whether Quebec had the right to secede from Canada unilaterally. The Court's judgement, delivered in 1998, was nicely balanced. Quebec had no right to secede unilaterally; but the Canadian government was bound to negotiate if Quebecers expressed a clear will to secede. The Canadian parliament could also decide if a referendum question was clear enough to trigger negotiations. Both federal and Quebec governments declared they were pleased with the judgement.⁴³

Chrétien used the judgement as the basis of the Clarity Act of 2000, but went further. The Act empowered the Canadian parliament to determine, in advance of the vote, if a referendum question in Quebec or any other province was precise enough. After the vote, parliament could decide if a clear will had been expressed and would override a referendum result that was contrary to the act.⁴⁴ This law was not well received, being attacked by other provinces as well as Quebec. It was also opposed by the federal Conservatives, whose policy, when they later regained power under Stephen Harper, was not to stir up the Quebec issue. Chrétien declared he 'was immensely pleased' when the Clarity Act was adopted.⁴⁵ Yet I doubt whether it would be an effective defence against a strongly backed separatist movement. It imposes constraints before a referendum vote, especially on how the question is drafted. But the powers given to the federal parliament to reverse the vote once taken could prove impossible to enforce. The best protection lies in changing opinion in the Quebec population, where recent events have been encouraging.

Jean Charest's time as Quebec Premier lasted the usual nine years. During this time the *Bloc Québécois* lost ground badly, dropping to only four seats in the 2011 federal elections.⁴⁶ Despite this, the PQ regained power in 2012, though only with a plurality of seats. The new premier, Pauline Marois, made no promises of a future referendum, preferring to wait till she could win a clear majority. After a strong start she felt confident enough to call early elections in April 2014. But her plans went badly astray. During the campaign it emerged that a PQ majority would be taken as the signal for a new referendum. This was not what the Quebec electorate wanted to hear. They voted the Liberals back into power with 70 seats and a large majority. The PQ won only 30 seats, with their smallest share of the vote since 1970, their first appearance. Quebec politics has clearly moved a long way from what I experienced more than 20 years ago.

Conclusions: What Britain should have learnt from Canada about referenda

The United Kingdom, like Canada in the twentieth century, might have to undergo the ordeal of three referenda early in the twenty-first century: one on whether Scotland stayed in the UK in 2014; one on whether the UK stayed in the European Union in 2016; and a second one on Scotland, which is already threatened. Scotland decided in 2014 to remain part of the UK by a margin of 55 per cent against 45 per cent. But the 2016 referendum meant that the UK would have to leave the EU after over 40 years as a member. This was the decision of 52 per cent of voters against 48 per cent, on a 78 per cent turnout. The government was wholly unprepared for this result.

If the Remain campaign had studied the lessons that emerged from the Canadian experience and put them into practice, the UK might still be in the EU and the chances of Scotland leaving the Union much reduced. To my mind, there are three key lessons, to be analysed in turn:

- Remember referendum votes are volatile.
- Campaign positively, not just negatively.
- Motivate your backers to turn out on the day.

Lesson 1 Remember votes in referenda are volatile

In referenda, electors do not always vote on the question; they are often expressing their displeasure with government more generally. In 1992 the Canadian people were meant to be voting on constitutional change. In fact they used the referendum to punish Mulroney for neglecting their economic problems.

Much the same happened in the EU referendum in the UK. Many Leave voters were genuinely hostile to the EU, especially because of immigration policy. But many others used the EU as a scapegoat for their other frustrations and discontents, for example over economic austerity or the dominance of London as compared with the rest of the country. The Leave campaign exploited these frustrations with their simple message of 'take back control', though few of the outstanding problems would be solved by leaving the EU and many would be made worse. The Remain campaign did not wake up to the depth of these discontents until it was too late.

Lesson 2 Campaign positively and vigorously

In Canada, the No campaign in 1995 was low key and appealed to reason. It was negative, pointing out the dangers of separation, and

nearly led to disaster. In contrast the Yes campaign was positive; it appealed to the heart and stressed the benefits of Quebec sovereignty. Only the emotional impact of the late Montreal rally saved the No side and kept Quebec in Canada.

For the EU referendum there was a similar contrast between the two campaigns. The Remain side relied on gloomy forecasts from the Treasury or the International Monetary Fund to underline the economic dangers of leaving the EU. But this negative campaigning turned people off and was mocked by the Leave side as 'Project Fear'. The Remainers failed to articulate the benefits of being part of the European Union and did nothing to appeal to wider aspirations. This gave the Leave campaign a free hand to promise extravagant and often imaginary benefits as the result of leaving the EU. People responded positively to this optimistic narrative, even if they did not necessarily believe all of it.

Lesson 3 Get your backers out on the day

In Quebec in 1995 the voter turnout was exceptional, at 93 per cent. Only one out of 15 electors failed to vote, so that both sides evidently made superhuman efforts to get their backers to the polls. Chrétien stressed the importance of this after the Montreal rally:

All weekend the No team, by now invigorated and united in a common cause ... never let up in its efforts ... to get out our voters. If we hadn't done that, I'm certain we would have lost.⁴⁷

The turnout for the 2016 EU referendum was 72 per cent. This was a high figure for a national vote in the UK. Yet even so, one out of four electors failed to get to the polls and this determined the result. Polls before the referendum showed clearly that older people favoured Leaving and were more likely to vote. Young people favoured Remaining, but their voting behaviour was less predictable. In the event, 64 per cent of electors under 25 voted, more than in early estimates, as against 90 per cent of those over 65.⁴⁸ The Remain campaign would have known how important it was to get young people out to vote, but did not do enough to make this happen.

Finally, the result of the EU referendum has transformed the prospects for Scotland. Canada's experience is again relevant, in two different ways.

After the Scottish referendum of 2014, Nicola Sturgeon, the leader of the Scottish Nationalists, seemed to be in the same position as

Lucien Bouchard when he took over from Parizeau as Quebec premier. Bouchard decided it was prudent to wait before holding another referendum. He wanted to ensure Quebec's economy was strong enough to survive on its own, detached from Canada. Only then would he feel confident of winning. But his chance never came.

The position in Scotland appeared to be comparable. Sturgeon would not want to risk another referendum unless she was sure of winning it. Scotland's economic prospects already looked doubtful when the 2014 referendum was held and have since worsened with the fall in the price of oil, Scotland's major asset. The UK government undertook to pass more revenue-raising powers to Scotland, which, over time, would reveal the true economic outlook of an independent Scotland. As in Quebec after 1995, these factors argued against an early new referendum.

But the result of the EU referendum of 2016 has changed the position fundamentally and invites a different Canadian comparison. The events of 1995 in Quebec flowed directly from the defeat of the constitutional referendum of 1992. This had been intended to reconcile Quebec with the rest of Canada, but failed to do so. The separatist *Parti Québécois* regained power, called another referendum and very nearly won it.

Unlike England and Wales, Scotland voted to remain in the EU, by 62 per cent against 38 per cent. The Scots realized how much they had to lose by leaving the European Union. Sturgeon appealed to Prime Minister Theresa May for a separate deal that would enable Scotland to stay in the EU Single Market, but May declined it, insisting on a single negotiating position for the United Kingdom. The political impact of Brexit therefore encouraged Sturgeon to bring forward a new independence referendum. In March 2017 she abruptly called for one, creating an additional problem for May just as she prepared to invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty.⁴⁹ Whenever this referendum takes place, the three Canadian lessons will still apply.

Notes

- 1 This article is an updated version of the annual Quebec lecture I delivered at the UCL Institute of the Americas on 2 July 2015.
- 2 A full account of my time in Canada can be found in my entry in the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Bayne.pdf>, 97–111.
- 3 G. Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837–67* (London: Macmillan, 1995).
- 4 R. Bothwell, *A Traveller's History of Canada* (New York: Interlink Books, 2010), 117–21.

- 5 Paul Martin (senior), who was Canadian Foreign Minister at the time, gives a full account of this episode in his memoirs, *A Very Public Life, Volume II* (Toronto: Deneau, 1985), 572–604.
- 6 A. Rotstein, ed., *Power Corrupted: the October Crisis and the Repression of Quebec* (Toronto: New Press, 1971). M. Bliss, *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995), 258–9.
- 7 Bothwell, *A Traveller's History*, 123–30.
- 8 See R. Delaney, 'Quebec Offers Model of How Money Moves on Secession Threat', *Financial Times*, 13/14 September 2014. The article was written just before the Scottish referendum.
- 9 J. English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Volume II 1968–2000* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2009). Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, 245–76.
- 10 The relevant passage is quoted in Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, 266.
- 11 Bothwell, *A Traveller's History*, 132–6. Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, 268–9.
- 12 B. Mulroney, *Memoirs 1939–1993* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007). Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, 277–306.
- 13 Bothwell, *A Traveller's History of Canada*, 149–53. Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, 292–300.
- 14 Bliss, *Right Honourable Men*, 300–3.
- 15 C. Hébert with J. Lapierre, *The Morning After: The 1995 Referendum and the Day That Almost Was* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2014), 8–10. This book is based on interviews conducted in 2012 with the main figures involved in the referendum, as identified in later notes.
- 16 'Separatism in Quebec: No, We Shouldn't', *The Economist*, 23 May 2015, 39–40. The article is linked to the arrival of the Scottish Nationalists in force at Westminster.
- 17 Hébert, *The Morning After*, 15–16 (Parizeau).
- 18 Our conversation took place over lunch in the British Consul-General's house in Montreal, from which James Cross had been kidnapped in 1970.
- 19 Parizeau had been speaking English, so his meaning was unmistakable. The phrase was later leaked to Chantal Hébert and published in French in *La Presse*; see A. Wilson-Smith and F.E. Kaye, 'Parizeau's Lobster Flap', *Maclean's*, 24 July 1995. But Hébert interpreted 'lobster pot' as meaning a saucepan of boiling water, which did not capture the image.
- 20 The text of the question is given in both French and English in Hébert, *The Morning After*, xi, with comment on 41–3.
- 21 J. Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007), 134.
- 22 Hébert, *The Morning After*, 87–8, 133, 251–2 (Chrétien).
- 23 Hébert, *The Morning After*, 11–14, 16–18 (Bouchard).
- 24 Hébert, *The Morning After*, 27, 33–5 (Dumont).
- 25 'Quebec's Road-Map, of a Sort, to Sovereignty, Maybe', *The Economist*, 10 December 1994, 71. Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 129.
- 26 J. Blanchard, *Behind the Embassy Door: Canada, Clinton and Quebec* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 235–6, 242. Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 137–8. Hébert, *The Morning After*, 94–6, 253–4 (Daniel Johnson and Chrétien again).
- 27 Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 143–7.
- 28 C. Trueheart, 'Canadians at Huge Rally Implore Quebec to Stay', *International Herald Tribune*, 28 October 1995. Hébert, *The Morning After*, 121–4 (Tobin).
- 29 Blanchard, *Behind the Embassy Door*, 248. Jim Blanchard, who was US Ambassador to Canada at the time, believed Clinton's support made a vital contribution to the narrow federalist victory. Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 139.
- 30 Blanchard, *Behind the Embassy Door*, 244. For Chrétien's reaction see note 39.
- 31 Chrétien gave a similar upbeat message to Jim Blanchard when he phoned him from the Montreal Rally (*Behind the Embassy Door*, 250).
- 32 Not far away, Chrétien (*My Years as Prime Minister*, 149–50) and Blanchard (*Behind the Embassy Door*, 259) were doing the same.
- 33 Quoted in the original French in J.F. Nadeau, 'Jacques Parizeau n'est plus', his obituary in *Le Devoir*, 2 June 2015.
- 34 Hébert, *The Morning After*, is entirely dedicated to it.
- 35 Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 150.
- 36 Hébert, *The Morning After*, 249–50.
- 37 'The Victory Speech That Never Was', *Montreal Gazette*, 22 February 1996, contains the draft speech Parizeau planned to give after winning the

- vote. Hébert, *The Morning After*, 43–5, 92.
- 38 'France Reassures Both Sides', *International Herald Tribune*, 1 November 1995.
- 39 Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 139–41. N. Bayne, *Economic Diplomat* (Durham: The Memoir Club, 2010), 185–6.
- 40 R. Palmer, 'Quebec Gets Concessions from Uneasy Canada', *Independent*, 29 November 1995. Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 151–3. Hébert, *The Morning After*, 213–17 (Mike Harris).
- 41 Hébert, *The Morning After*, 96 (Johnson) and 123 (Chrétien).
- 42 Quoted in Hébert, *The Morning After*, 295.
- 43 Supreme Court of Canada, *Reference re Secession of Canada*, Report 2 SCR 217(1998). Available at: <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1643/index.do>. Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 164–6.
- 44 Canadian Parliament, *An Act to give effect to the requirement for clarity as set out in the Supreme Court of Canada in the Quebec Secession Reference* (S.C. 2000, c. 26). Available at: <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/>.
- 45 Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 167–71.
- 46 Though the BQ recovered to ten seats in the 2015 elections, this was still below the threshold for official party status in the federal parliament.
- 47 Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, 149.
- 48 T. Helm, 'EU Referendum: Youth Turnout Almost Twice as High as First Thought', *Observer*, 10 July 2016. See also Ashcroft Polls at <http://www.lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>.
- 49 F. Elliott, H. Macdonell and B. Waterfield, 'Sturgeon Ambushes May', *The Times*, 14 March 2017.

Note on contributor

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