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— Pierre Trudeau

1. 1980-05-20
2. 1995-10-30

HUBERT BAUCH
THE GAZETTE

REFERENDUMS should normally be a good way for us to solve all sorts of problems,” says Soucy Gagné, head of SORECOM, Quebec’s most respected polling firm.

Unfortunately, he adds, we haven’t quite got the hang of them yet. “Here they wind up giving free rein to extremists on all sides.”

In one of Gagné’s recent political surveys, two thirds of the respondents said there should be another referendum on Quebec’s constitutional status if the Meech Lake agreement falls through on June 23. The Parti Québécois, according to its current doctrine, would stage a whole series of referendums.

This suggests that 10 years after the referendum of May 20, 1980, a lot of people have forgotten what that one was like.

Calling for repeat performance

Even former prime minister Pierre Trudeau is among those calling for a repeat performance.

Speaking of Canada’s future as a nation at the launch of his recent book, he declared it will be decided only “when we have another clear referendum and the people of Quebec make up their minds.”

But he didn’t always feel that way about referendums.

“A little too simplistic or silly a solution,” he sniffed when Jean-Jacques Bertrand, the late Union Nationale premier, first proposed a constitutional referendum during the summer of 1969.

“If they’re already talking about a second referendum, I shudder at the rending of the social fabric of Quebec,” Trudeau said 10 years later when the PQ finally unveiled its convoluted referendum question on Dec. 20, 1979.

“I always said a referendum is divisive by its very nature. It pits neighbor against neighbor, father against son.”

And so it was.

But it also turned out Trudeau was one of the few people who reaped any kind of clear benefit from the referendum.

His three speeches in Quebec during the referendum campaign of 1980 are remembered as the finest hours of his political career. The No victory (59.56 per cent to 40.44) created the opening he needed for his 1981 constitutional reform initiative.

And it was by dangling the offer of a referendum rematch before René Lévesque during the white-knuckle endgame of the 1981 constitutional negotiations that he breached the solidarity of the “gang of eight” premiers who had stymied his cherished Charter of Rights and patriation package until

The wounds from last time still haven’t healed completely.”

The referendum campaign began to take shape in December 1977, when the PQ government, after a year in office, introduced legislation setting out the referendum rules.

It imposed organizational restrictions and spending limits on the two sides which were criticized for infringing on prevailing North American standards of freedom of association.

The PQ said it had based its legislation on British and Australian referendum models, which turned out to be only partly true.

It took another two years for the PQ to come up with its 107-word question, asking only for a mandate to negotiate sovereignty-association, and promising a second referendum before any change in Quebec’s constitutional status.

The wording was largely dictated by polls that showed the PQ’s only conceivable chance of winning the referendum was to water the question down with the mandate to negotiate and to build in the escape hatch of the second referendum.

From then on, Lévesque and the PQ set out to talk as little as possible about sovereignty-association itself. Instead, there was a lot of sweet talk about a new relationship with Canada, of painless bureaucratic rearrangements and negotiations between equals.

On the No side, meanwhile, they were threatening widows with the loss of their pensions.

Many observers noted that Lévesque’s referendum campaign was reminiscent of a travelling fundamentalist revival show. He would whip the crowd up with “The Speech,” then members of the audience would be encouraged to come forward and declare their fealty to the Yes side. Later Lévesque would hand out certificates to the true believers.

All that was missing was the canvas roof, the sawdust on the floor and miracle cures for bunions.

Constant clashing of egos

The No campaign was slow to get off the ground because of the constant clashing of powerful egos.

According to the PQ’s referendum law, the half-dozen political parties supporting the No had to squeeze themselves into one umbrella organization over which Claude Ryan, then the provincial Liberal leader, imposed his authority.

The greatest source of friction throughout the campaign was between the federal and provincial Liberal “cousins,” and in particular between Ryan and Jean Chrétien, then the federal justice minister who had been assigned by Trudeau to oversee the federal effort in the No campaign.

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But for most, in retrospect, the referendum of 1980 was largely a waste of time and money, of energy and emotion. Ten years later, it feels like we're back at square one.

"What I find tragic is that a whole group of intelligent people spent this crazy amount of energy for at least four years, all focused on a referendum," said BCN chairman Michel Bélanger some time after the vote.

'What we could have done'

"I don't want to sound contemptuous, but if all that intelligence had been put in to something concrete, just think of what we could have done to show the world."

Few of the participants in the referendum struggle wound up covering themselves with glory. Instead, it tended to bring out the worst in our politicians, who scaled new heights of demagoguery for the most part, and plumbed fresh depths of cynicism.

And it rent the soul of Quebec society, disrupting the peace of communities, the harmony of families and ties of long-standing friendships.

For most people in the frontlines of the referendum campaign, it was the most momentous, most exhilarating experience of their lives. But many of the same people shudder at the thought of doing it again.

Pierre Bibeau, the chief administrator of the Olympic Park, was the Quebec Liberal Party's chief organizer during the referendum campaign and a key player in the No operation.

"It was the most intense period of my whole political career," he said this week. "I've been through six election campaigns, but none of them was anything like the referendum. We had the feeling we were writing a page of history."

But once was enough, Bibeau said.

"It was very divisive in the end. It divided Quebec profoundly, to the point where many of the wounds haven't healed. There were quarrels in families, there were hard feelings between colleagues at work and between neighbors at home.

"Personally, even if it was a very special feeling, it's not something I'd want to repeat.

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The poisonous relationship between the two culminated on referendum night when they almost got into a wrestling match over the microphone before the crowd at No headquarters.

When things looked dicey in mid-campaign, the federal government weighed in with an orgy of thinly disguised pro-No advertising that was technically in violation of the referendum rules.

The most flagrant example was an anti-alcohol campaign whose slogan, "Non merci," just happened to be the one of the federalist referendum slogans.

But then the PQ wasn't above that kind of thing itself. Shortly before the campaign, billboards began springing up touting a Transport Department seat-belt campaign whose two-pronged message was "On s'attache au Quebec."

And both sides suddenly found money lying around for all manner of long-delayed local construction projects.

One of the few truly inspirational episodes of the referendum campaign was the "Yvette" women's movement in favor of the No side, which was sparked by a mean-spirited and ill-considered remark about Claude Ryan's wife Madeleine by PQ minister Lise Payette.

The Yvette movement provided the spark of soul the No side had lacked up until then. It culminated in a glorious rally at the Montreal Forum where 14,000 women turned out to sing O Canada with a gusto that hadn't been heard in the city for many a year.

"It was the most beautiful event I've ever attended," said Louise Robic, one of the key organizers of the Forum rally who is now Quebec's junior finance minister.

"I remember when Senator (Thérèse) Casgrain got up to speak and the band started to play Vive la Canadienne, and all the women got up and linked hands and sang with them. It was extraordinary."

But Robic wouldn't want to go through another referendum campaign either, even if she could have another night like that.

"Never," she said flatly. "It took too much out of me and everybody else. It was so intense. I have a lot of good memories and it was an extraordinary time. But for me it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing."

The question

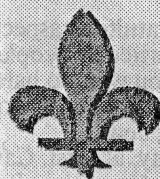
Referendum

The government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations;

this agreement would enable Quebec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes and establish relations abroad — in other words, sovereignty — and at the same time, to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency;

no change in political status resulting from these negotiations will be effected without approval from the people through another referendum;

on these terms do you give the government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada?



Yes
40.44
%

No
59.56
%

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