

## Clash of the Titans: the Trudeau-Lévesque Debates and their Legacy in Contemporary Canada

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After almost one hundred years since Confederation, during the 1960s and the Quiet Revolution—along with the wave of industrialization, economic reform and bureaucratic reorganization that came with them—there was a surge of nationalism among French Canadians in Quebec which culminated in a sovereigntist movement that is still active today. While it could be argued that the desire for French-Canadian independence pre-dates Confederation, this movement undoubtedly increased in popularity and became more politically significant during the decades following the Quiet Revolution, resulting in two referendums on the subject. The issue of sovereignty was also central in the relationship between Pierre Elliott Trudeau and René Lévesque during their time in office as prime minister and premier of Quebec, respectively. Their opposite views and subsequent encounters and debates on the subject, and the ways in which those debates affected the nature of the relationship between the populations they were elected to represent (and the political choices they made on their behalf), have left a lasting impact on the state of Canadian unity, even years after the deaths of these central players. As a result of Trudeau's inability to counter the strong divisive forces which gained a voice with Lévesque's election to office in 1976, the "two solitudes"<sup>1</sup> remain fundamentally divided—even among themselves—despite their increased contact and confrontation in recent years.

In order fully to understand how Trudeau and Lévesque arrived at such different positions despite their relatively similar pasts, and in order to provide sufficient context for the emergence of their opposition, it is important to begin

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh MacLennan, *The Two Solitudes* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003).

with the years before their arrival on the political scene. During Maurice Duplessis's time as premier of Quebec in the 1950s, "a vigorous debate about Quebec's past and future developed"<sup>2</sup> as a result of a growing sense of frustration with the seemingly unbeatable Union Nationale and its conservative policy based on patronism and an increasingly old-fashioned view of Quebec. Many believed that Quebec needed to embark on a path of industrialization and industrial nationalization if it was to keep up with the rest of Canada.

Among the new political views that began to gain prominence in the 1950s were those of the "*Cité libristes*,"<sup>3</sup> a group of intellectuals led by Trudeau and Gerard Pelletier who saw nationalism as an obstacle to social change, and who placed central importance on reforming the role of the state to "accept a positive role in social and industrial development."<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to counter the Union Nationale, the "*Cité libristes*" formed a group called *Le Rassemblement* in September 1956,<sup>5</sup> the goal of which was the "[defense and promotion of] democracy in Quebec against the threats posed by corruption and authoritarianism."<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that their group never managed to gain enough support to become a force of opposition—its readership "never more than a few thousand"<sup>7</sup>—and eventually ceased to exist,<sup>8</sup> the 1950s were formative years for Trudeau; it was during this time that he "thought through and elaborated his political philosophy ... [and] learned [about] the mechanics of politics." These lessons would eventually prove to be essential in his future role as prime minister.

It was not until the death of Duplessis on 7 September 1959<sup>9</sup> that Quebec saw a different political party in provincial power. On 22 September

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<sup>2</sup> Ramsay Cook, *Canada, Quebec, and the Uses of Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1986), 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre E. Trudeau, *Memoirs* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), 70.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gwyn, *The Northern Magus: Pierre Trudeau and Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Cook, *Uses of Nationalism*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Jones, "Duplessis and the Union Nationale Administration," in *Quebec Since 1945*, ed. M. Behiels (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1987), 20.

1960,<sup>10</sup> Jean Lesage's Liberals, on the basis of a policy of "reform and modernization,"<sup>11</sup> narrowly defeated the Union Nationale, ending the latter's dominance of provincial politics and initiating a period of rapid industrialization and social reform.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of its time in office, the Lesage administration would go on to bring "Quebec's public institutions more fully into conformity with social and political reality,"<sup>13</sup> and thereby improve the province's economic and political position in Canada. Its administrative strategy also switched the province's relationship with Ottawa from Duplessis' minimalism and isolationism in dealing with federal support, to undertake "a large number of public programs that required increased activism in federal-provincial relations"<sup>14</sup> in order to move Quebec toward a position of equality with the other Canadian provinces. It began with a "call for equality (though not necessarily uniformity) and ended with a call for special status for Quebec."<sup>15</sup> The latter inspired much criticism, the strongest of which came from Lévesque.<sup>16</sup>

It was this political and economic maturation, as well as a renewed relationship with Ottawa,<sup>17</sup> that enabled Quebec to become an increasingly significant force within Canada, and afforded it a position of being able to make requests (and even demands) of the federal government; after years in a politically subordinate position, the only province in which French was the dominant language had acquired the power to have its voice heard and to demand a response. The only remaining questions were: Where did Quebec was to be, and which direction did it need to take to get to it?

Among those who felt they had an answer was Trudeau, the Montreal-born French-Canadian "playboy/dilettante"<sup>18</sup> who rode into federal politics on a wave of popularity termed "Trudeaumania." From a wealthy family, Trudeau

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Quebec Since 1945*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Cook, *Uses of Nationalism*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Alain-G. Gagnon and Mary Beth Montcalm, *Quebec Beyond the Quiet Revolution* (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1990), 152.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>17</sup> Gagnon, *Quebec Beyond*, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall, *Trudeau and Our Times, Vol. 1: The Magnificent Obsession* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1990), 20.

earned a law degree at the University of Montreal in 1943<sup>19</sup> before going on to study economics and political science at Harvard University. It was during this time abroad that he realized “that the Quebec of the time was away from the action, that it was living outside modern times.”<sup>20</sup> He returned to Canada after earning his Master’s degree from Harvard, but left again in 1946 to embark on what would become world-wide travels.<sup>21</sup> Returning home to Montreal, Trudeau was disappointed to find that Quebec had hardly evolved under Duplessis: it “had stayed provincial in every sense of the word... marginal, isolated, out of step with the evolution of the world.”<sup>22</sup> Upon his return he joined his friend Gérard Pelletier on a trip to cover the Asbestos Strike for *Le Devoir* – a prominent Montreal-based daily newspaper. Witnessing this event – and involving himself on the side of the miners – proved to be immensely significant for Trudeau and his conception of Quebec. He later went on to describe it as “a turning point in the history of the province.”<sup>23</sup>

Over the course of the next few decades, Trudeau added experience to ambition. He became a professor of law at the University of Montreal in 1962,<sup>24</sup> joined the federal Liberal Party, was elected to Parliament in 1963,<sup>25</sup> was appointed as a Parliamentary secretary by Lester B. Pearson,<sup>26</sup> and was named Minister of Justice in April 1967.<sup>27</sup> All these positions helped him establish a name for himself in Ottawa and English Canada, despite only having two years of political experience.<sup>28</sup> He announced his intention to campaign for leadership of the Liberal Party on 16 February 1968<sup>29</sup> and took up residence at 24 Sussex Drive on 22 April 1968.<sup>30</sup> He would reside here until his loss to Joe Clark’s

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<sup>19</sup> Trudeau, *Memoirs*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 37-61.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>24</sup> Gwyn, *The Northern Magus*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Trudeau, *Memoirs*, 76.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>28</sup> Ramsay Cook, *Watching Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 207.

<sup>29</sup> Trudeau, *Memoirs*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 92.

Progressive Conservatives in the 1979 election,<sup>31</sup> and then again for a second time beginning in 1980.<sup>32</sup> His time in office, together with the events witnessed in response to the Asbestos Strike, reaffirmed the opinions he had formed earlier on: the faulty democratic structure of Quebec's provincial government needed to be reformed,<sup>33</sup> and that nationalism was inherently threatening to equality with other Canadian provinces. He wanted to "rid [Quebec] of the reactionary, paternalistic... regime of Maurice Duplessis."<sup>34</sup>

Around the same time, Lévesque, who had been growing "increasingly... critical of the federal system,"<sup>35</sup> "more openly nationalist,"<sup>36</sup> and increasingly dissatisfied with the Quebec provincial Liberal Party over their refusal to discuss the issue of sovereignty,<sup>37</sup> was beginning to expound his own views about how the province should proceed. After studying at Laval University, Lévesque gained widespread recognition in Quebec through his work with Radio-Canada in the 1950s<sup>38</sup> and by serving as a correspondent during World War Two.<sup>39</sup> He entered politics in 1960 when he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Quebec as a member of Lesage's Liberals,<sup>40</sup> during which time he "played a leading role in launching the Quiet Revolution."<sup>41</sup> Such a position was gained through his dominant role in the nationalization of Hydro-Quebec, as well as through the prominent posts he held as Minister of Public Works, Minister of Natural Resources, and Minister of Welfare.<sup>42</sup>

On 14 October 1967, Lévesque was forced to resign from the Liberal Party after unsuccessfully attempting to "convert [the Party] to his point of

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<sup>31</sup> Clarkson, *Trudeau and Our Times*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>33</sup> Cook, *Uses of Nationalism*, 63.

<sup>34</sup> Cook, *Watching Quebec*, 213.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Gérard Bergeron, *Notre miroir à deux faces* (Montreal: Québec/Amerique, 1985), 56.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> William Johnson, *A Canadian Myth: Quebec, Between Canada and the Illusion of Utopia* (Montreal: Robert Davies Publishing, 1994), 23.

<sup>41</sup> Cook, *Watching Quebec*, 208.

<sup>42</sup> James William Hagy, "René Lévesque and the Quebec Separatists," *The Western Political Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1971), 55.

view” with regard to sovereignty association with Canada.<sup>43</sup> He resolved to form his own political party, and announced the creation of the *Mouvement souveraineté-association* on 18 November 1967.<sup>44</sup> This would eventually merge with the *Ralliement national*, another political group advocating Quebec independence from Canada,<sup>45</sup> to form the Parti Québécois on 14 October, 1968.<sup>46</sup> This occurred just shy of six months after Trudeau was elected Prime Minister of Canada. His ideas were also expounded in a book called *Option Quebec* which became a best-selling novel in the 1960s, and which helped pressure other similarly-minded nationalist groups to join them.<sup>47</sup>

These were to be Quebec’s titans in the coming years: two individuals with relatively similar backgrounds who had been optimistic that the Quiet Revolution would bring much needed change, but who had reached diametrically opposed conclusions about the path the province needed to take in order to modernize without losing its distinctive cultural and linguistic heritage.<sup>48</sup> Trudeau believed that the emphasis should be placed on making Quebec more democratic, and on reforming federalism rather than doing away with it entirely, that there was a fault within the system, rather than that the system itself was faulty.<sup>49</sup> Lévesque, on the other hand, believed that federalism was inherently threatening to Quebec’s unique identity, and that sovereignty association and a relationship of “[d]’égal a égal”<sup>50</sup> (between two equal nations) was the only way to preserve that uniqueness without crippling the province’s future.

Thus, when Lévesque and the Parti Québécois were elected to provincial parliament on their third try on 15 November 1976,<sup>51</sup> an adolescent Quebec found itself at a crossroad between two opposite and, to a large extent, rival ideologies: Prime Minister Trudeau’s “Actonian pluralism... in which ethnic

<sup>43</sup> Hagy, “René Lévesque,” 55.

<sup>44</sup> André Bernard, *What Does Quebec Want?* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1978), 17.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard, *What Does Quebec Want?*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Cook, *Watching Quebec*, 215.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

distinctions balanced each other,”<sup>52</sup> and Premier Lévesque’s sovereignty association, which advocated political independence with “a continuing economic association”<sup>53</sup> with Canada. To further complicate the choice, Quebec was left with little alternative. “Special status, Trudeau and Lévesque agreed, was neither fish nor fowl;”<sup>54</sup> there would be no compromise between the two extreme positions, no discussion of ‘special status.’

For Lévesque, this unwillingness to compromise was perfectly consistent with his radical political and ideological position, and perhaps even strengthened it. However, for Trudeau, a man seeking to unite two populations held to be as distinct as he and Lévesque, this resoluteness would seem to go against, or at least undermine, the intended project; if the goal was to make all Quebecers feel at home in Canada, presenting one’s self as antagonistic to a political position held by an increasingly prominent proportion of the population was a bold strategy, at best. Nevertheless, the Liberals continued to garner support from Quebec voters (except for a brief loss of support resulting in a minority government in 1972)<sup>55</sup> until their loss to Joe Clark’s Progressive Conservatives in 1979.<sup>56</sup>

Yet election results often prove problematic if they are used as the basis of arguments about the opinions of the Canadian population. This is especially the case when one compares the success of the federal Liberals in Quebec with the simultaneous success of Lévesque’s Parti Québécois in the provincial arena.<sup>57</sup> While each leader’s opinion on Quebec’s position in Canada was undoubtedly not the only factor influencing votes, it is certainly puzzling that Quebec elected to simultaneous power two men with opposing views on the subject. This is especially the case given Lévesque’s assurance that a win for the Parti Québécois

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<sup>52</sup> Cook, *Watching Quebec*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>55</sup> *History of Federal Ridings Since 1867*,

<<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/process/house/hfer/hfer.asp?Language=E&Search=Gres&genElection=29&ridProvince=0&submit1=Search>>, 21 March 2008.

<sup>56</sup> *History of Federal Ridings Since 1987*,

<<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/process/house/hfer/hfer.asp?Language=E&Search=Gres&genElection=31&ridProvince=0&submit1=Search>>, 21 March 2008.

<sup>57</sup> André Bernard, *La vie politique au Québec et au Canada* (Quebec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 1996), 210; William Johnson, *A Canadian Myth: Quebec, Between Canada and the Illusion of Utopia* (Montreal: Robert Davies Publishing, 1994), 161.

would result in a call for a referendum on the subject of sovereignty.<sup>58</sup> The Quebec population, it seems, was far from being unanimous in support of one position or the other.

Undoubtedly with a heightened sense of urgency, Trudeau traveled to Quebec City shortly after the province's new leader gave his first major speech in New York City on 25 January 1977.<sup>59</sup> His speech focused on the need for Quebec to come to a decision about its national identity "after twenty years of soul-searching," and challenged Lévesque to prove that an independent Quebec would be better off than it could be guaranteed to be in the federal system.<sup>60</sup> He also affirmed his willingness to "negotiate some constitutional changes that would give the provinces additional power," but rejected Joe Clark's suggestion of decentralization. He maintained that the response to separatism should be to "make French-Canadians feel at home everywhere in Canada."<sup>61</sup> He further argued that French-Canadians' culture and rights would be better safeguarded through the extension of "their dynamism to all of Canada [rather] than by falling back on Quebec."<sup>62</sup>

To his appeal for "commitment to a broader, inclusive political community"<sup>63</sup> was juxtaposed the "atavistic sense of *nous*"<sup>64</sup> emphasized by Lévesque. Lévesque tried to get around Trudeau and to demonstrate Quebec's self-sufficiency by engineering an agreement with the other provincial premiers to ensure French-school rights that would make federal intervention unnecessary.<sup>65</sup> While all of the other premiers rejected Lévesque's proposal for reciprocal agreement, he was successful in persuading all ten to "sign a statement that accepted the principle of schooling in the minority language, but left its application to the discretion of each province." In so doing he acquired and

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Jones, "French Canada and English Canada: Conflict and Coexistence," in *Readings in Canadian History: Post Confederation*, eds. R. D. Francis and D. B. Smith (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1982), 621.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 157.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

ensured the provincial French-education rights that Trudeau had never been able to secure.<sup>66</sup>

Trudeau's position suffered another blow when his third attempt to patriate the Constitution was as unsuccessful as the previous two.<sup>67</sup> He proposed a revision of the Constitution, with a "statement of rights, including language rights, at [its] heart,"<sup>68</sup> and a call for more power for the provinces in electing representatives to the Senate (which would also be transformed into a "House of Federation").<sup>69</sup> At the same time, Trudeau was also committed to the idea that changes should be reciprocal.<sup>70</sup> The premiers, however, were not as interested in Trudeau's proposed patriation and language rights as they were in "the idea of Canada as a confederacy of sovereign provinces" and increased provincial power, which Trudeau refused. Thus, they were unable to come to any agreement.<sup>71</sup> His proposal was unanimously opposed by the provincial premiers who "chose to align themselves with [Lévesque] rather than with the federalist prime minister," just as they had before.<sup>72</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Liberals lost to Joe Clark's Progressive Conservatives, and Trudeau resigned from politics.<sup>73</sup> It is ironic that the man who set out with the explicit goal of uniting the provinces in a renewed constitution managed rather to further alienate them from the idea of federalism, pushing them closer to the man who's position has always been Quebec sovereignty.

Lévesque kept his campaign promise by raising the issue of Quebec sovereignty in a referendum called for 20 May 1980.<sup>74</sup> He had hesitated in setting a date, sensing that the time was still not yet right—that the "*population n'est pas mûre* [population is not ripe]"<sup>75</sup>—despite results from polls conducted by

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<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. Trudeau had failed previously because of Robert Bourassa's veto the first time, and a coup, organized by Bourassa, the second.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>74</sup> Bernard, *La vie politique*, 213.

<sup>75</sup> Pierre Godin, *René Lévesque: l'espoir et le chagrin* (Quebec City: Les Éditions du Boréal, 2001), 417.

Radio-Canada which indicated the opposite.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, many party members insisted that the Parti Québécois had a better chance of victory with Clark and his minority government in federal power.<sup>77</sup> Once the date was set, however, both sides hastened to prepare for the eventual face-off.

Lévesque's position was and had always been clear: sovereignty association. What was less clear was what that meant for the Quebec-Canada relationship. One of his first goals as uncontested leader of the "yes-campaign,"<sup>78</sup> therefore, was to expound upon and popularize this position by emphasizing that it meant neither separation, nor a turning-into-itself. Rather it meant renewing and opening up a relationship between two equal partners, between self-governing associates.<sup>79</sup> His position was supported by long-held ideas of Quebec's unique identity within Canada (which, it is argued, makes federalism ill-suited to the province's interests), the argument that federalism was costly and inefficient, and that sovereignty was the only way to assure "the survival of a French-speaking population in North America."<sup>80</sup> The latter had been used to support nationalist agendas since the 1830s.<sup>81</sup> Lévesque's main focus, however, was to downplay the parts of the party's platform that were understood to be more radical. This meant emphasizing that a vote of yes to the referendum would be a vote in favour of *opening up* discussions between Quebec and the federal government,<sup>82</sup> and that no separation would occur unless the population wanted it. Moreover, separation could only be decided in *another* referendum.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the referendum was portrayed less as wedge to separate the two sides but

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<sup>76</sup> Godin, *René Lévesque*, 420. According to Godin's text, Radio-Canada had conducted public-opinion poles which concluded that 66 percent of the Quebec population would vote "yes" to initiating discussions on the subject of sovereignty, 25 percent would vote "no," and 6 percent remained undecided, and that in over two years of surveying the results had remained consistent.

<sup>77</sup> Marguerite Paulin, *René Lévesque: Charismatic Leader* (Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 2003), 102.

<sup>78</sup> For the sake of this paper, "yes" side, "yes" campaign, and so forth refer to the side in favour of sovereignty, while "no" side, "no" campaign, and so forth refer to the federalist side.

<sup>79</sup> Godin, *René Lévesque*, 421.

<sup>80</sup> Bernard, *What Does Quebec Want?*, 127.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Godin, *René Lévesque*, 421.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 165.

rather as bargaining tool which the provincial government would be able to use to apply more pressure on the federal government in considering its demands.<sup>84</sup>

After a difficult start, the no-campaign was eventually taken up and led by Claude Ryan, the leader of the provincial Liberals and a strong federalist who was committed to the idea of renewed federalism. He focused most of his efforts on playing to Quebecers' fears. Drawing attention to the wording of the question to appear on the ballot, he claimed that the Parti Québécois was trying to "[mislead] the population with a trick question" that would in fact lead to sovereignty.<sup>85</sup> His arguments, however, lacked the emotional appeal so central in Lévesque's platform, and it soon became evident that more support would be needed to ensure a victory for the "no."<sup>86</sup>

For the sake of brevity, the nature of the guidelines and rules which applied to the campaigns for either side will not be explored in full. It should be noted, however, that there exist varied and often conflicting accounts of the nature of the debates. Some claim that the "yes" side was given every possible advantage (after the start of the campaign a charge of intentional bias to make campaigning as difficult as possible for the "no" side is often made),<sup>87</sup> while others account the "yes" side's strong support at the beginning of the campaign to the Parti Québécois's skilled orators. The "no" side's early struggle it is often suggested, can be attributed to Claude Ryan's narrow-minded focus on the wording of the question to appear on the ballot.<sup>88</sup>

Either way, Trudeau soon entered the fray in support of Ryan, stating his refusal to negotiate with Lévesque on the subject even if the referendum ended in victory for the "yes" side.<sup>89</sup> The premier responded by challenging Trudeau to a debate, but the latter refused on the grounds that accepting would amount to circumventing the referendum and "[short-circuiting] the No Committee and its leader, Claude Ryan."<sup>90</sup> Trudeau nevertheless addressed the

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<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 165.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>86</sup> Hubert Guindon, *Quebec Society: Tradition, Modernity, and Nationhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 114.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 164.

<sup>88</sup> Guindon, *Quebec Society*, 113-4.

<sup>89</sup> Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 172.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

issue in a speech at Paul Sauvé Arena on 14 May 1980 in which he reassured Quebecers that a “no” vote would not be understood as “an indication that everything is fine and can remain as it was before,” but rather that change would be on the horizon. At the same time, however, Trudeau reiterated his fixed position regarding discussions on the subject of sovereignty.<sup>91</sup> Trudeau challenged Lévesque’s claims that the other provinces would support an independent Quebec, arguing that they had “already turned down any suggestion of association to go with Quebec’s sovereignty.” Perhaps most important, he drew attention to a comment the premier had made on several occasions to contrast Lévesque’s implicit intolerance and limited conception of what it meant to be *Québécois* (namely, to be a Quebecer *and* to vote *oui*) with Trudeau’s own pluralistic, inclusive vision of and for Canada.<sup>92</sup> Six days later, 59 percent of Quebecers voted against sovereignty association.<sup>93</sup>

Yet it would be foolish to discount the efficacy of the referendum, despite its seeming failure from the sovereigntist perspective. In the case of the 1980 referendum—as would later be the case with the next referendum in 1995—strong support for the sovereigntist side early on in the campaign resulted in the Prime Minister promising constitutional reforms and renewed discussions if the final outcome was a “no” to sovereignty.<sup>94</sup> This adds weight to the claim that the debate was more about re-negotiating Quebec’s position and lobbying for additional provincial powers or autonomy, than a concerted effort at full political autonomy. Even for those for whom sovereignty *was* the goal, however, the 1980 referendum was not a complete failure: it showed the lengths to which the population was ready to go if the current government was not improved to their satisfaction. Moreover, it put the power back in the hands of the population.

It is also important to note that in declaring his refusal to negotiate, even if the referendum returned a “yes” vote, Trudeau effectively transformed the issue from a choice between sovereignty and renewed federalism, to a choice between political expression of discontent and renewed federalism; in

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<sup>91</sup> Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 172.

<sup>92</sup> Trudeau, *Memoirs*, 282; Johnson, *A Canadian Myth*, 172.

<sup>93</sup> Jones, *Readings in Canadian History*, 622.

<sup>94</sup> Trudeau, *Memoirs*, 282.

acknowledging Quebec's support of Lévesque as an expression of discontent with federalism, promising change regardless of the outcome and assurance that a vote for the provincial premier was impotent, Trudeau effectively removed all reason to vote "yes" (or, in effect, to vote at all). As a result, while the federalist side may have gained an edge, the sovereignty side, while not sufficiently discredited, never lost ground.

Furthermore, while Trudeau's side emerged victorious, the excitement was short-lived when the Liberals encountered opposition from provincial leaders once again in their next attempt to patriate the Canadian Constitution in 1982.<sup>95</sup> This time, however, Lévesque's "efforts to form and maintain a united provincial front among the 'gang of eight'—all provinces except Ontario and New Brunswick—against the federal government's constitutional package proved futile." After Lévesque had gone home for the night, the other premiers worked out a deal that was approved and accepted by Trudeau. In this new deal, struck "without Quebec's consent,"<sup>96</sup> and which to date no Quebec premier has acknowledged as legitimate, Quebec lost "the right to veto as well as the right to opt out with compensation."<sup>97</sup> Lévesque did little to conceal his anger, telling his wife Corinne, "[t]hey stabbed us in the back!"<sup>98</sup> a feeling shared by many in the province, including those who had been unsure about Quebec's position in this "renewed federalism."

In his memoirs, Trudeau admits having been forewarned by Premier Sterling Lyon of Manitoba that going ahead with the planned patriation without full consent would "tear the country apart."<sup>99</sup> Never one to mince words, Trudeau replied that "if the country was going to be torn apart because we bring back... our own constitution after 115 years ... then the country deserves to be torn up."<sup>100</sup> Indeed it would have come as little shock to anyone that the decision to proceed without Lévesque's agreement would be unpopular in Quebec. After decades of failed attempts, however, Trudeau had lost his patience with the anti-federalist premier.

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<sup>95</sup> Clarkson, *Trudeau and Our Times*, 285, 290.

<sup>96</sup> Guindon, *Quebec Society*, 145.

<sup>97</sup> Paulin, *René Lévesque*, 112.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Trudeau, *Memoirs*, 306.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, after managing to convince the majority of Quebecers to vote ‘no’ to Lévesque on 20 May 1980, Trudeau did not waste time before making it perfectly clear that he was intent on patriating the constitution, with or without provincial support.<sup>101</sup> This was a bold move so soon after the Quebec population had been divided almost in half over the issue of sovereignty, and it undoubtedly did little to make Quebecers feel at home in a country ruled by a government that had effectively ignored their provincial representative.<sup>102</sup>

Their displeasure would be felt in the next few years when, after the defeat of both the Meech Lake Accord in 1987 and the Charlottetown Accord in 1992, the province faced another referendum on the subject of sovereignty in 1995.<sup>103</sup> This time, the question on the ballot was much less ambiguous than had been the question used in 1980. When the results were announced, the sovereigntists, despite having lost again, had nevertheless lost by a much narrower margin: 50.56 percent voted “no” and 48.44 percent voted “yes.”<sup>104</sup> If Trudeau had made any gains for federalism over sovereignty in the 1980s, either those gains had been lost, or sovereignty had since made larger gains; any unity achieved now faced an uncertain future.

Trudeau’s time in office was a time of great change and, in many cases, great advancement. He was a gifted orator and had the strength of conviction and determination that Canada needed in a leader. More than this, Canada also needed a pacifier. As Trudeau proved on several occasions, however, perhaps most notably in his dealings with Lévesque, who goaded him (and Quebec) to come to a decision regarding the province’s identity and relationship with Canada, a pacifier he was not. For a brief period under his leadership he managed to unite the provinces. However that fragile unity was dependent upon his power and presence to maintain it. Quebec-Canada unity began to erode once was Trudeau was out of office and no longer present to safeguard that delicate relationship.

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<sup>101</sup> Clarkson, *Trudeau and Our Times*, 312.

<sup>102</sup> Paulin, *René Lévesque*, 109.

<sup>103</sup> Gerald L. Gall, “Quebec Referendum (1995),” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ART A0010730>>, 2008.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*