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## Understanding the Current Political Climate in Québec

AFTER THE 1998 QUÉBEC ELECTION there seemed to be a collective sigh of relief throughout the nation—a separatist government “yes” but a referendum mandate “clearly not.” Under normal circumstances a high popular vote (without the seats to match) usually results in rumbles for electoral reform, but in this case the high popular vote for Charest’s Liberals also led to another post-electoral discussion: the signal that many Quebeckers were not—are not—ready for another referendum. Yet this outcome really tells us very little about what Quebeckers want. For certainly, popular vote or not, many Quebeckers are not happy with the status quo and nothing about Québec’s constitutional status has changed. So, while the problem may have been put into hibernation for some time, we cannot ignore the fact that the bear will wake up. In fact, springtime may already be here as Bouchard has started to forage throughout Québec to garner support for another referendum. It seems prudent then for us to consider that the current political climate in Québec is more uncertain than it appears.

Of course, Canada has been in this same position before. As Gordon Gibson argued in 1994,

The challenge a person has in today’s climate is the disposition to regard the Québec election as kind of a comforting development that, after all, Mr. Parizeau [read Mr. Bouchard] didn’t get much of a majority at all, the popular vote just barely won, that it was in effect a win for the provincial Liberals because Mr. Johnson [read Mr. Charest]

has good support now, and you can pretty well forget the referendum because it isn't going to pass.<sup>1</sup>

Gibson foresaw that such an attitude might lead to complacency and to "uncertainty" about Canada's future. The 1995 referendum result bore out his fears. So, having been in this position before, we should know that Canada cannot simply sit back and assume that Quebeckers will not want another referendum. Nor that a weak popular vote means that Bouchard cannot win the next referendum.

Understanding the current political climate in Québec requires that we look beyond the usual variables precisely because we have been in this situation before and precisely because we were not able to stop the near miss referendum result. It is in this context that I wish to examine the broader context of the constitutional dilemma in Canada.<sup>2</sup> This paper has two main areas of concern. First, it discusses the parallels in the way in which the failure of the Charlottetown Accord (CA)<sup>3</sup> and the near success of the Québec referendum (QR) in 1995 were explained, reviewing the political, substantive, procedural, and social explanations. Second, it introduces a new application of a theoretical and methodological framework of analysis. I argue that we should reconsider the Québec/Canada debate from the perspective of the participants in the referendum—in other words take a more "social" approach to understanding the current climate of constitutional crisis, following the advice that Elizabeth Gidengil offered in her 1992 article that a "stubbornly 'non-social' social psychology" has dominated the field [of electoral studies].<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Gibson, "Decentralization: Finding a Better Way for Canada," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 61.5 (1994).

<sup>2</sup>Tracy Summerville, "Political Culture: The Relationship Between 'Organizational Identity' and 'Individual Identity': An Exploration of the Charlottetown Accord," PhD dissertation, Université Laval, 1998.

<sup>3</sup>Where it facilitates reading I will refer to the Charlottetown Accord as the CA and the Québec referendum as the QR.

<sup>4</sup>Elisabeth Gidengil, "Canada Votes: A Quarter Century of Canadian National Election Studies," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 25 (June 1992): 219–48.

*The Failure of the Charlottetown Accord and the Québec Referendum: A Summary Review*

There is, of course, a change in the tone of the discussion between the Charlottetown Accord and the Québec Referendum. In terms of the CA it is often discussed in terms of failure, while the QR is discussed in terms of its near success. Regardless of this “overtone” the explanations are quite similar and can be divided into three types: one, based on how the accord and the referendum question were “sold” to the public (the political explanation); two, as outputs of government (the substantive explanation); and three, the failure of the system in which the accord and the referendum question were fashioned (the procedural explanation).

There is also a fourth type of explanation which is advanced here and which can be found in some of the literature on Charlottetown. This is the explanation that examines the relationship between identity and constitutional change (the social explanation). This explanation, I believe, would greatly improve the discussion on the Québec referendum and the understanding of the current political climate in Québec.

*The Rejection of the Accord and the Near Success of the Referendum Based on How They Were “Sold”: The Political Explanation*

The “political explanation” can be discussed based on two points: 1) the incapacity/capacity of political leaders to “sell” the project to citizens and 2) the incapacity/capacity of political leaders to actually “play politics.”

In their article, “Referendum Voting: Attitudes and Behaviour in the 1992 Constitutional Referendum,” LeDuc and Pammett argue that four plausible explanations for the failure of the accord surfaced after the referendum: the substance of the agreement, groups and benefits, dissatisfaction with politics, and reinforcing cleavages. They found that while each of these factors, particularly the first, had some explanatory value, none was sufficient in and of itself to explain the failure. Their data, they argue, “clearly suggest that .... the campaign itself did matter.”<sup>5</sup> Their overall conclusions

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<sup>5</sup>Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett, “Referendum Voting: Attitudes and Behaviour in the 1992 Constitutional Referendum,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 28.1 (1995): 30.

lead them to suggest that many voters were simply reacting to the campaign battle and in particular to “the Mulroney factor”—that is, the argument that voters who disliked or distrusted Prime Minister Brian Mulroney voted against the accord.

The Québec referendum literature uses the same expression: “the Bouchard” or “Lucien factor.” As the Québec referendum campaign proceeded it was noted that Lucien Bouchard could have a significant impact on the results. Andrew Phillips, writing in *Maclean's* magazine, said that

... until Premier Jacques Parizeau bowed to intense pressure from within his own Parti Québécois and handed Bouchard the effective leadership of the Yes forces, the squabbling, stumbling sovereigntists had seemed doomed to failure—their leader ineffective, their troops demoralized, Bouchard's nomination as the “chief negotiator” for Québec in the event of a YES vote at least gave the separatist camp a fighting chance.<sup>6</sup>

The second political explanation for the failure of the CA is advanced by Manfredi and Lusztig. They argue that political elites had to “play politics” (that is play the bargaining game) without actually having the manoeuvrability to bargain. The purpose of the Manfredi and Lusztig article “is to understand the conditions under which the instrumental objectives of participants in the politics of constitutional modification threaten to cascade endlessly, overloading the capacity of the amendment process to resolve key issues.” The argument is that the political game can no longer be played because a set of institutionalized factors (amendment rigidity, judicial interpretation and mass input) have led to “specific requests for regulative and interpretive rule demands.”<sup>7</sup> They argue that there is a sense that “redistributive indeterminacy” (that is how the constitution might be interpreted in the future) which leads to amendment overload.

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<sup>6</sup>Andrew Phillips, “The Bouchard Factor,” *Maclean's Magazine* 108.43 (1995): 10.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher P. Manfredi and Michael Lustig, “Amendment Overload: The Politics of Constitutional Pluralism,” *The Canadian Political Science Association Meeting* (1996): 3

Similarly, F.L. Morton argues that the courts are partly responsible for the failure of the CA because the courts have become political by granting non-governmental groups “quasi-official constitutional status at the micro-level of (judicial) constitutional politics,” [and now] these groups feel they have a right to participate at the macro-level.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the Canada Clause<sup>9</sup> became overloaded as governments and other non-governmental groups who had not been successful or had lost at the micro-level tried to ensure a legal status for future litigation.<sup>10</sup> The result is that no matter how contradictory or confusing, everyone wants a clause to support their cause; yet, ultimately because of the confusion and contradiction people voted NO.

In the case of QR, as Nelson Wiseman argues, the political elites in the campaign “could not agree on what they or the other side stood for.”<sup>11</sup> As Wiseman explains,

The NO called the YES separatist, but the Yes insisted it was sovereigntist and in search of partnership. The Yes called the No the status quo, but the No insisted it stood for constant, iterative, and evolutionary change. Each of these competing visions and interpretations had truthful elements. The Yes offered its history of Québec's betrayal in 1981, and Trudeau, who sat silently through a frontal assault on his constitutional handiwork, challenged that account as a revisionist lie but did so only after the vote.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>“Judicial Politics Canadian Style: The Supreme Court's Constitutional Crisis of 1992,” *Constitutional Predicament: Canada after the Referendum of 1992*, ed. Curtis Cook (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1994) 146–47.

<sup>9</sup>The Canada Clause acted as a preamble to the Charlottetown Accord. In the final version it says (in part) that, “A new clause should be included as Section 2 of the *Constitution Act, 1867* that would express fundamental Canadian values. The Canada Clause would guide the courts in their future interpretation of the entire Constitution, including the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.” These “values” often seemed inconsistent. For example, the courts were to confirm provincial equality as well as recognizing Québec's distinct society.

<sup>10</sup>Morton, “Judicial Politics Canadian Style” 147.

<sup>11</sup>“The Quebec Referendum of 1995,” *Politics: Canada*, ed. Fox and White (McGraw-Hill, 1999) 25.

<sup>12</sup>Wiseman, “The Quebec Referendum” 25.

In this case, both sides had little room to manoeuvre because they had difficulty representing themselves to the public. The YES camp seemed reluctant to actually spell out what they thought the partnership would look like and the NO side had both Meech and Charlottetown as historical albatrosses around their neck. How could Quebecers be convinced that anything would change after two such disasters?

In terms of the judiciary's role in politics it is also possible to draw a parallel. Let's face it, in the eyes of many, Québec had no right to be proceeding with a referendum at all. The uncertain status of the legality of a referendum on secession gave both sides good fodder for the campaign. In the case of the YES campaign,

Parizeau declared that a democratic referendum did not require the judiciary's indulgence, and his government told the court that the referendum conformed to accepted rules of international law which recognize a subject people's right to seek independence.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that the court could judge Québec's future and deny the right of the Québécois to determine their future played nicely into the hands of the YES side. In terms of the NO side, who were reluctantly drawn into the "legal" question,

A judge of Québec's Superior Court declared the bid to secede unconstitutional, but he pointedly noted that neither the federal government nor the provincial Official Opposition had intervened to create obstacles to the referendum. "We must conclude that the population has a desire to express itself," read the judgment, and an injunction to prevent the referendum was denied."<sup>14</sup>

We know now that the Supreme Court supported this finding and followed its own "fatal tilt"<sup>15</sup> patriation reference decision when it

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<sup>13</sup>Wiseman, "The Quebec Referendum" 26.

<sup>14</sup>Wiseman, "The Quebec Referendum" 26.

<sup>15</sup>The reader will recall that the court found in favour of the federal government's right to patriate the constitution but said that by convention they should consult the provinces.

ruled on both legality and convention: Québec could not legally unilaterally separate but by convention we would not stop a democratic vote to secede—essentially saying that, in the case of a positive outcome, the ROC should negotiate.

So in the case of both of the CA and QR the “political explanation” is central to explaining the failure/success of the referenda but both arguments rely on the petty side of human nature, i.e., that we vote for/against those we like/dislike or because we feel that no one has the right to decide our fate except ourselves. While these arguments are valid, there is a concern that we still do not understand the full extent of the psychological needs of the participants to assure their place when changes are made.

*The Rejection of the Accord as an Output of Government: The Substantive Explanation*

In terms of the CA, the substantive explanation seems to be the most widely accepted and argued. One part of this explanation is that individuals saw in the substance of the Accord that there would be “winners and losers” in the agreement and therefore rejected the Accord because they were on the “losing side.”<sup>16</sup> The two issues most often cited seem to be “the distinct society clause” (being a losing aspect in Québec because it was seen as symbolic and not substantive)<sup>17</sup> and “the 25% guarantee of seats in the House of Commons for Québec” (being a losing aspect for the West because they felt it to be unfair).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Kenneth McRoberts, “Disagreeing on Fundamentals: English Canada and Quebec,” *The Charlottetown Accord, the Referendum, and the Future of Canada*, ed. Kenneth McRoberts and Patrick J. Monahan (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993) 249–63.

<sup>17</sup>Judy Rebick, “The Charlottetown Accord: A Faulty Framework and a Wrong-headed Compromise,” *The Charlottetown Accord* 102–06; André Blais and Jan Crête, “Pourquoi l’opinion publique au Canada anglais a-t-elle rejeté l’Accord du lac Meech?” *L’Engagement intellectuel: Mélanges en l’honneur de Léon Dion*, ed. Raymond Hudon and Réjean Pelletier (Sainte-Foy: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1991) 385–400.

<sup>18</sup>Peter H. Russell, “The End of Mega Constitutional Politics in Canada?” *The Charlottetown Accord* 211–21; Errol P. Mendes, “Sinking Again into the Quagmire of Conflicting Visions, Groups, Under-inclusion, and Death by Referendum,” *The Charlottetown Accord* 163–70.

A second reason for the failing based on the substantive argument is focused less on specific parts of the accord but rather on the Accord as a package. First it has been considered as incomprehensible:<sup>19</sup> too much, too fast, and in some places, contradictory—especially where the Canada Clause was concerned.<sup>20</sup> Second, as an overall package it seemed to contain two different conceptions of political community (the Québec kind and the Rest Of Canada [ROC] kind).<sup>21</sup> And third, it did not appeal to a clear conception of justice.<sup>22</sup> I will focus briefly on this final argument.

Alain Noël suggests that when we do not know the outcome or consequences of a proposal we are likely to make our judgments based on whether or not we think the document conforms to our sense of justice.<sup>23</sup> He likens this to a “Rawlsian original position” in which individuals, stripped of their identity, choose principles of justice which favour the least advantaged.<sup>24</sup> While I completely agree with Noël that it is more appropriate to explain the failure of the Accord by appealing to the capacity of individuals to deliberate their own fate rather than to a knee-jerk reaction based on ignorance and cynicism, I am not sure that it is fair to use Rawls in this case. It is true that we certainly can say that we do not know where the changes will lead—but we do know who we are, for example, a Saskatchewan farmer or a British Columbian lawyer or a Kahnawake Mohawk Indian Chief. Self-interest, in this case, does not have to mean mean-spiritedness. The very fact that there are competing conceptions of the good and therefore different conceptions of justice shapes the way we deliberate. I will suggest that the uncertainty of the outcome of changes to the constitution forces individuals not to deliberate justice for all but justice for their individual conceptions of the good shaped by their particular social construction of reality. And this is not what Rawls is talking about.

<sup>19</sup>Russell, “The End of Mega Constitutional Politics in Canada?” 211–21.

<sup>20</sup>Errol P. Mendes, “Sinking Again into the Quagmire” 163–170; Robert J. Jackson, “Comments on Janet Aizenstat’s Essay,” *Constitutional Predicament* 126–31; Morton, “Judicial Politics Canadian Style” 132–48.

<sup>21</sup>McRoberts, “Disagreeing on Fundamentals” 249–63.

<sup>22</sup>Alain Noël, “Deliberating a Constitution: The Meaning of the Canadian Referendum of 1992,” *Constitutional Predicament* 64–81.

<sup>23</sup>Noël, “Deliberating a Constitution” 71.

<sup>24</sup>Noël, “Deliberating a Constitution” 64–81.



In terms of the QR, the substantive argument is really based on two critiques: the “fudginess” of the question and the mysterious Bill-1 respecting the future of Québec. It can certainly be argued that any discussion of the question should fit into the arguments around procedure and, in fact, I will discuss it there as well, but the issue of the question is also an issue of substance since the question and the bill were the only tangible referendum documents upon which Quebeckers were asked to make their decision. The question read:

Do you agree that Québec 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 Québec and of the agreement on June 12, 1995?

Frederick Johnstone argues that this question was simply a tactic by the PQ to draw in more YES votes. According to Johnstone, a simple, straightforward question would have revealed the “Achilles’ heel of Québec separatist[s], that is that separation has never been very popular in Québec.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Paul Globus argues that a direct question would have revealed the real intentions of the PQ, “separation at all costs and to hell with all deals and further negotiations with the federal government.”<sup>26</sup>

These arguments suggest that Quebeckers did not understand the question because the government did not clarify what it meant by “sovereignty,” “formal offer,” “partnership,” “the bill” etc. Yet, obfuscating the question, it seems to me, is a sure-fire way to reduce the number of YES votes. I am not sure that it is a foregone conclusion that a clear question would lead to more NO votes. It is one thing to say that the government needs to clarify points and quite another to say that people did not understand the question, or better still, that they did not understand exactly what they were voting for. And, in terms of the mysterious Bill-1, I am aware that

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<sup>25</sup> “Canadian Federalism: The Decline and Fall of Quebec Separatism,” *Telos* 109 (1996): 141.

<sup>26</sup> “Questioning the Question: The Quebec Referendum,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 53.2 (1996): 148.

anecdotal evidence is not particularly scientific, but if you were living in Québec at the time of the referendum, it was no mystery that Bill-1 was the PQ's memorandum of understanding with the Québec public in regard to the way they saw the future governing principles of Québec. It is probably true that outside Québec there would have been confusion about "the Bill" but this was less of a problem than it was made out to be.

It is of course true that there were "grey zones" in the question. Even recent opinion polls show that some Quebeckers think a sovereign Québec would still be a part of Canada.<sup>27</sup> But let us "cut to the chase" on this: did Quebeckers know what they were voting for, or didn't they? Probably not, but not because the question was unclear, but rather because the consequences were unclear. In the end no one, academics and voters alike, really knows how a YES vote would be played out,<sup>28</sup> so we need to ask ourselves the question: why did 49.4 per cent of voters vote in favour of "the question?"

*The Rejection of the Accord Based on the Failure of the System in which it was Fashioned: The Procedural Explanation*

One of the other common explanations for the failure of the CA is the procedural explanation: namely that the whole process by which the constitution was being debated actually doomed it to fail before it even got started.<sup>29</sup> This explanation is interesting because it is based heavily on liberal democratic theory and the debate over how much participation is too much. It has been pointed out that since the 1980–82 constitutional round and with a rights-driven

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<sup>27</sup>See CROP poll cited in Joan Fraser, *Quebeckers and Canadians: Irreconcilable Differences?* (The Council For Canadian Unity: <http://www.ccu-cuc.ca/en/polls/unifraser.html>). Amongst other things, the poll shows that 44 per cent of Yes voters ("those who say they would vote Yes in the same question asked in the October 1995 referendum") believe that a sovereign Québec would still be part of Canada.

<sup>28</sup>See Stéphane Dion, "The Dynamic of Secessions: Scenarios after a Pro-Separatist Vote in a Quebec Referendum," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 28.3 (1995): 533–51.

<sup>29</sup>Michael Lusztig, "Constitutional Paralysis: Why Canadian Constitutional Initiatives Are Doomed to Fail," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 27.4 (1994): 747–71; Janet Ajzenstat, "Constitution Making and the Myth of the People," *Constitutional Predicament* 112–31.

Charter, any constitutional discussion that does not include public input is unlikely to succeed.<sup>30</sup> There is a whole Charter generation that has taken on the Trudeau philosophy that individuals should be sovereign over government (some would argue that this is somewhat “Un-Canadian”) and so any constitutional proposals not driven by the grassroots are likely to meet with resistance—as Neil Nevitte has demonstrated, there has been a decline of deference in Canada.<sup>31</sup>

Michael Lusztig, among others, has argued that participation has destabilized the constitution-making process. Lusztig suggests two reasons for this: first, that “mass input/legitimization undermines effective elite accommodation”; and second, that “mass input/legitimization is a catalyst for the creation of constitutional interest groups.” In other words, because constitutions can provide “institutionalized special status,” different groups have an incentive to rally support for their cause and thus force their issue onto the constitutional table.<sup>32</sup>

Janet Ajzenstat’s article also draws upon the warnings of liberal democratic theorists to support her position. What Ajzenstat fears is that what Canadians, as participants in the constitutional process, have been doing is seeking a consensus on what the constitution should be. She argues that constitutions are about devising rules to adjudicate conflict; consensus, she argues, borders on political tyranny.<sup>33</sup>

Ajzenstat contends that “new politics,” which she describes as a postmaterialist backlash characterized by a “lack of confidence in the political system, distrust of politicians, dissatisfaction with opportunities for effective citizen participation [and], impatience with political forms and formalities,”<sup>34</sup> causes difficulties because it does not allow for elite accommodation or compromise.

But the fact is that even if Ajzenstat and Lusztig are right, that

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<sup>30</sup>See Michael Stein, “Improving the Process of Constitutional Reform in Canada: Lessons from the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Constitutional Rounds,” *The Canadian Journal of Political Science* 30.2 (1997): 307–38.

<sup>31</sup>Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross-national Perspective* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996).

<sup>32</sup>Lusztig, “Constitutional Paralysis” 748.

<sup>33</sup>Ajzenstat, “Constitution Making and the Myth of the People” 124–25.

<sup>34</sup>“Constitution Making and the Myth of the People” 125.

“the people” should not be involved in constitution making, it is somewhat too late for this insight. These new groups are forcing their way to the table because individuals seek a sense of purpose and place within society—and not just in any society but in a society of which they are a part, a society which shapes them and which they help to shape.

In the case of the QR, the procedural explanation is fairly simple. First, it was true that the referendum was really a “non-binding plebiscite,”<sup>35</sup> and second, many claimed that Québec had no right to be seeking the answer to a question regarding a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI), which, it was said, was not within Québec's powers. But however the process was perceived, Quebecers must have believed that they were making a legitimate choice. How else do you explain the overwhelming voter turnout (93.52)? Plebiscite or referendum aside, people were still making a choice about their future and about their “place within Canada.” Discrediting the process does not help us to explain why so many Quebecers voted in favour of the question and, at the end of the day, this is really what we have to understand.

*The Rejection of the Accord Based on the Relationship Between Identity and Constitution Making: The Social Explanation*

It seems that few authors have focused on the social explanation for the failure of the CA and the near success of the QR.<sup>36</sup> So how is the social explanation defined? It is argued here that the social explanation has to do with the way individuals perceive change. James Tully argued that

When Canadians come to discuss the constitution, they negotiate and deliberate in the light of the diverse visions and in terms of the diverse stories with which they have learned to think and talk about the character of

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<sup>35</sup> See Wiseman, “The Quebec Referendum” 24.

<sup>36</sup> See James Tully, “Diversity’s Gambit Declined,” *Constitutional Predicament* 149–98; Cairns, cited in Jean Lapensee, *Debating the Constitution / Débat Sur la constitution* (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1994); and Marc. T. Boucher, “A Québec Perspective: The Struggle to Save Canada,” *Orbis* 41.3 (1997): 445.

Canada since childhood and schooling. These different yet overlapping ways of thinking about the character of Canada are deeply inscribed in the diverse cultures, political struggles, and ways of life that make up Canadian history and social movements. *They are modes or ways of experiencing Canada, of being Canadian.* Since each understanding articulates the way political power should be organized from its perspective, when it is brought forward as the comprehensive understanding, each necessarily posits its arrangement of political power as normative. This is the basic impasse—not inexperience, complexity, the shortcomings of a text, or the mistakes of politicians, but as Dubuc writes, a “structural impasse” inscribed in Canadian “history” and “social movements.”<sup>37</sup>

Understanding these “modes or ways of experiencing Canada” might help us to explain why individuals were reluctant to accept the CA. It might also help us to explain why some Quebeckers were willing to accept sovereignty for Québec. If an individual’s “mode or way of experiencing being Canadian” is denied or treated as politically insignificant, it is possible to imagine that an individual may not wish to stay in a Canada that is no longer “theirs.” So better understanding these perceptions may actually help us to determine if individuals are capable of accepting change. I argue that if changes are framed in opposition to an individual’s core understanding of their country they may be unwilling to stay in a country constructed upon new principles. The social explanation examines the link between identity and constitutional change. I turn now to the theoretical perspective where I outline a framework for such an explanation.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Theoretical Perspective: Reframing the Organization*

In an article entitled, “Reframing the Organization: Why Implementing Total Quality Is Easier Said Than Done,” Reger et al. begin

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<sup>37</sup>Tully, “Diversity’s Gambit Declined” 160–61 (my italics).

<sup>38</sup>I assume that I can argue that the QR was an attempt at constitutional change.

by stating that planned organizational change is difficult.<sup>39</sup> This simple statement says a great deal about how individuals perceive change. Organizational behaviour theorists have argued that there is a connection between an “organization’s identity” and an individual’s identity. Albert and Whetten suggest that there are “three criteria for an adequate statement of organizational identity: the criterion of claimed central character (features that are somehow the essence of the organization), the criterion of claimed distinctiveness (features that distinguish the organization from others with which it may be compared), and the criterion of claimed temporal continuity (features that exhibit some degree of sameness or continuity over time).”<sup>40</sup>

But where do our ideas about an organization’s identity come from? The literature suggests that individuals use or have certain “interpretive schemes” or “cognitive frameworks”<sup>41</sup> which are two concepts used to describe the “cognitive schemata that map our experience of the world” or ways in which individuals “actively construe their environment ... through schemas or person[all] constructions of reality.”<sup>42</sup> It is argued that interpretive schemes allow individuals to explain or express their understanding of why certain events happen or why people act or react in certain ways and help individuals to define the action they will take. When decision-makers suggest a solution to a problem—in reaction to an issue or environmental change—the solution is meant to “represent the organization’s values (desired ends and preferences) and interests (views of the appropriate allocation of scarce resources)” i.e., its organizational identity.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Rhonda K. Reger, Loren T. Gustafson, Samuel M. Demaries, and John V. Mullane, “Reframing the Organization: Why Implementing Total Quality is Easier Said Than Done,” *Academy of Management Review* 19.3 (1994): 565.

<sup>40</sup>Stuart Albert and David A. Whetten, “Organizational Identity,” *Research in Organizational Behavior* 7 (1985): 263–95.

<sup>41</sup>Jean M. Bartunek, “Changing Interpretive Schemes and Organizational Restructuring: The Example of a Religious Order,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 29 (1984): 355–72.

<sup>42</sup>Reger et al., “Reframing the Organization” 567–68.

<sup>43</sup>Bartunek, “Changing Interpretive Schemes” 356.

When an issue forces organizational members to focus on the organization's identity as a guide for action, two things can happen depending on whether an individual has, or conversely does not have, the power or control to explicitly define the features of the organizational identity. In the first scenario, where individuals have some power to determine the features of the organization's identity, they frame their response to the issue with their representation of the organization already in mind. Thus their response and subsequent action further shapes the organizational identity, the same way as individuals define themselves by committing actions consistent with their values and principles.

Now, in the second case where the individual does not have power to explicitly outline the central, distinctive and enduring features of the organization, at least two things can happen. First, when a solution is offered which seems in line with an often implicit understanding of the organizational identity, organizational members are unlikely to resist the organization's action. These kinds of solutions are generally in line with the status quo and do not generally upset the member's interpretive schemes. But when there is a radical shift that seems to be taking the organization in a new direction (whether perceived as positive or negative) old and new interpretive schemes collide and a new organizational identity is forged. How organizational members respond to the new identity will affect their acceptance of change. There are at least two kinds of cognitive barriers which can "undermine the acceptance of new programs": first, because "schemas are composed of a finite set of constructs, individuals may be unable to comprehend fully the meaning of the change"; and second "changes that are framed in concepts opposed to positively valued elements of organizational identity are likely to be resisted."<sup>44</sup>

In the case where the comparison between the change, the current organizational identity, the organizational image and the ideal organizational identity is unsatisfactory to the individual—i.e., the individual feels that the differences between the ideal and the change, or the change and the current organizational identity, are too wide—further difficulties will arise. As Reger et al. explain:

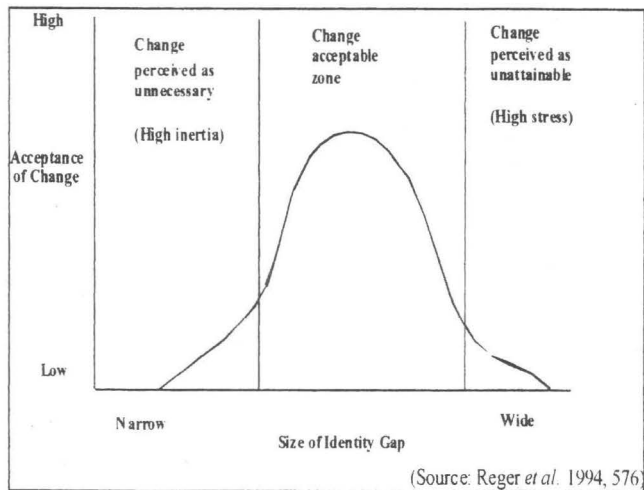
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<sup>44</sup>Reger et al., "Reframing the Organization" 565–84.

In contrast, a widened identity gap is a source of organizational stress, defined ... as the “dissatisfactions of individual actors and imperfections in the fit between the organization and its environment.” In general, organizational stress leads members to seek to close the gap. The perceived gap between “who we are” and “who we want to be” creates pressure for change within the minds of organizational members—managers and employees alike. Members will not be content to remain in a state they believe is subideal because it results in uncomfortable negative affect.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, negative perceptions of “the change” to the organizational identity can affect the implementation of new ideas.

**Figure 1: Probability of Change Acceptance**



In thinking about this, it seemed fruitful to extend the conclusion of this theory to the failure of the CA and near success of the QR. Although Canada is not an organization in the same way as

<sup>45</sup>Reframing the Organization” 575–76.



is a business, it does have critical parallels. It is not hard to imagine that individuals have a clear perception about their country and about their place within it. Like an organization, Canada has a structure of power, it has an identity, or perhaps several identities. It has a history and a purpose. So, as has been done in studies of large-scale organizational change, it may be possible to identify the kinds of cognitive barriers that became barriers to change in projects like the CA. And this may help us to better understand the near success of the QR and the current political climate in Québec.

*Reframing the Organization: The Canadian Case*

Prior to 1982, the compact theory, the dual nation theory, and the one nation theory were probably the three most clearly articulated “visions” of the claimed central character (i.e., Albert and Whetten’s first criterion) of Canada’s organizational identity. In the case of the second criterion (the criterion of claimed distinctiveness) the feature that distinguishes the organization—Canada—from others with which it may be compared, is that Canada is not the United States. And the title of Seymour Lipset’s study, *Continental “Divide”: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*, expresses this distinction. As Lipset explains,

The United States and Canada remain two nations formed around sharply different organizing principles. Their basic myths vary considerably, and national ethos and structures are determined in large part by such images. One nation’s institutions reflect the effort to apply universalistic principles emphasizing competitive individualism and egalitarianism, while the others are an outgrowth of a particularistic compact to preserve linguistic and provincial cultures and rights and elitism.<sup>46</sup>

This distinction between Canada and the United States is one of the central features that has continued to legitimize Québec’s active participation in Confederation. This feature really rests on the idea that governments do have some vision for the society and that

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<sup>46</sup>Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 225.

Canada's guiding principles were not, at least from the outset, driven by a recognition for individual liberties.<sup>47</sup>

As for Albert and Whetten's third criterion (temporal continuity) we know that over time all three visions of Canada's organizational identity have in some ways endured. As Edwin Black writes,

Canadians who have been alive to their social surroundings and who have lived for long in more than one region understand that "one nation" falls far short of describing their country. So too does "two nations," unless the term is appreciated in the significant sense of being two linguistic cultures .... While the political features of the dualist concept may conform admirably to the French Fact, it fails utterly to fit the fact of the heterogeneous English-language communities. In similar fashion, the centralist concept ignores completely the implications of impracticality inherent in the creation, development, and flourishing of whole, new, and separated provincial communities, a marked contrast to the sporadic and uncertain course of the "nation-building" attempted on a Canada-wide basis during the same period. In an age in which governments are activist and interpenetrating at all three levels, the compact theory is anachronistic. Only a modified coordinate approach seems to offer the possibility of a federal polity that facilitates an optimum mixture of the major competing values of the day.<sup>48</sup>

So what has changed? Kenneth McRoberts argues that

The Constitution Act, 1982, can best be understood as the imposition by the Trudeau government of its own conception of Canada. Where it could, the government

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<sup>47</sup> See Robert Vipond, "From Provincial Autonomy to Provincial Equality (Or, Clyde Wells and the Distinct Society)," *Is Quebec Nationalism Just?: Perspectives from Anglophone Canada*, ed. Joseph J. Carens (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1995) 3–14.

<sup>48</sup> *Divided Loyalties: Canadian Concepts of Federalism* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's UP, 1975) 231–32.

mobilized support for its initiative, inserting provisions in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that ensured the support of specific social groups, primarily in English Canada. But where necessary, Trudeau and his colleagues were more than prepared to defy those who opposed their initiative and the conception of Canada that underlay it. This meant defying much public opinion in Québec, federalist as well as sovereigntist.<sup>49</sup>

The changes to Canada's organizational identity, at least in the opinion of Québec, have been summarized this way: the end of duality; principles incompatible with Québec's distinct identity; and the *Constitution Act, 1982* becoming a political force "in Canada."<sup>50</sup>

Many authors have argued that the *Constitutional Act, 1982* overrode the intended spirit of 1867 and chose something between compact and one nation theory.<sup>51</sup> Trudeau's compromises in the *Constitution Act, 1982* did not extend to include a vision of Canada as a compact between two nations. In fact, with no formal recognition of Québec, the notwithstanding clause (section 33) of the Charter and the opting out clause, the act suggested a kind of provincial equality which could signal nothing else but that Québec's view of the organizational identity was wrong: Canada was not a dual nation. It was a nation of sovereign peoples and, begrudgingly on Trudeau's part, a compact of provinces.

If Québec's treasured characteristic of Canada is that it had distinguished itself from the United States because Canada had allowed that "an individual's liberty could be limited quite legitimately in the name of some more important community goal,"<sup>52</sup> then we must concede that this too, in the eyes of Québec, has altered. *The Constitution Act, 1982* and particularly the inclusion of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* moved substantially away from

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<sup>49</sup>*Misconceiving Canada: The Struggle for National Unity* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1997) 170.

<sup>50</sup>Conseil du statut de la femme, *L'Avenir politique et constitutionnel du Québec: Les analyses de la situation et les voies de solution selon les rapports Bélanger-Campeau et Allaire* (Government of Québec, 1991) 5–6.

<sup>51</sup>Guy Laforest, *Trudeau and the End of A Canadian Dream* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1995).

<sup>52</sup>Vipond, "From Provincial Autonomy to Provincial Equality" 3–14, 101.

the distinctive quality that Québec believed being part of Canada could offer. The seeming move toward American individualism really undermined, for Québec, Canada's distinctive quality.

One of the most profound changes that has arisen from the *Constitution Act, 1982* is the change in the political culture in "the rest of Canada." Trudeau's decision that the people would be sovereign over all levels of government did move Canada's political culture in that direction. Charles Taylor among others has argued that "the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* has come to fill this role [as a common reference point of identity] in English Canada in the past few years."<sup>53</sup> For better or worse, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* has placed the individual over all levels of government (except in cases where section 33 may be used to override certain freedoms) and has given legitimacy to the participation of a number of groups in the constitutional process.<sup>54</sup> Essentially the Charter gave power to citizens to ensure that they would be involved in framing any further changes, in other words, that they would have the power to "direct any further organizational action." The failure of the Meech Lake Accord is generally attributed to this surge in citizen interest in directing their organization.<sup>55</sup> Yet it would be unfair, or rather misleading, to suggest that all Canadians (outside Québec) have become "Charter Canadians." Neil Nevitte argues that while the Charter did have an unmistakable effect on Canada's political culture it is also true that there was a dramatic rise in interest in politics and political participation "throughout all advanced industrial states" where "the constitutional equivalent of a Charter had not been introduced."<sup>56</sup>

By 1992, the time of the Charlottetown Accord, there was to be a new tool for participation, namely a national referendum. This is significant because it was the first time that ordinary Canadian citizens would have a say in the direction of their "organization's

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<sup>53</sup>Charles Taylor and Guy Laforest, *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1993) 161–62.

<sup>54</sup>Jean-Luc Gingras, "Sur le Multiculturalisme et la politique de la différence identitaire: Taylor, Walzer, Kymlicka," *Politique et Sociétés* 16.2 (1997): 31–65.

<sup>55</sup>Russell, "The End of Mega Constitutional Politics in Canada?" 215.

<sup>56</sup>*The Decline of Deference* 104–05.

identity”—at least constitutionally. And whether or not constitutional theorists agree that ordinary citizens should have a hand in steering the ship is essentially irrelevant, because for better or worse, this is where we find ourselves.

So why did the CA fail and the QR nearly succeed? In part, it seems that we may respond to this question by looking at how the organizational identity had changed. If Canada outside Québec (the COQ) had accepted the new organizational identity entrenched in the *Constitutional Act, 1982* (a combination of the compact theory and Trudeau's one-nation theory), then trying to reframe the organizational identity in cognitive opposition to the new central, distinctive and enduring characteristics may have led individuals to reject the new organizational identity outlined in the accord. Yet, if the organizational identity has lost coherence for Quebeckers, then they may be willing to leave rather than “remain in a state they believe is subideal.”<sup>57</sup> It seems that if the current organizational identity has shifted far outside the “acceptable gap” then perhaps many Québécois will be willing to “take the plunge”—not simply because Bouchard thinks it is a good idea and in spite of the fact that the question is not clear. It would be a fruitful exercise to examine this social explanation in terms of the current Québec climate. It seems we need to find out how big the identity gap really is. This is the project of a future study, but I hope that this social explanation can give us a greater insight into what may have happened in the last referendum—and what we might have to think about before the next one.

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<sup>57</sup>Reger et al., “Reframing the Organization” 575–76.