

CANADA

Starting Over

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Last October 30, 94 percent of people of voting age in the province of Quebec participated in a plebiscite about its future in the Canadian Federation. Quebec's autonomist government's proposal was defeated at the polls by only a narrow margin of 50.6 percent to 49.4 percent. It was the second time in 15 years that the residents of this majority (82 percent) French-speaking population was called upon to vote about political sovereignty.

At the beginning of the plebiscite campaign, both partisans of a yes-vote and partisans of a no-vote predicted that this would be the last referendum of its kind. No matter which position won, the consultation was to put an end to years of interminable constitutional discussions in Canada and to uncertainty about whether Quebec residents wanted to be an autonomous national entity or not. The almost even outcome of

the referendum produced exactly the opposite effect: we can predict that there will be more constitutional discussions in Canada and that, if their outcome does not satisfy the expectations of the majority of Quebecois, there will be another consultation about the political future of the province.

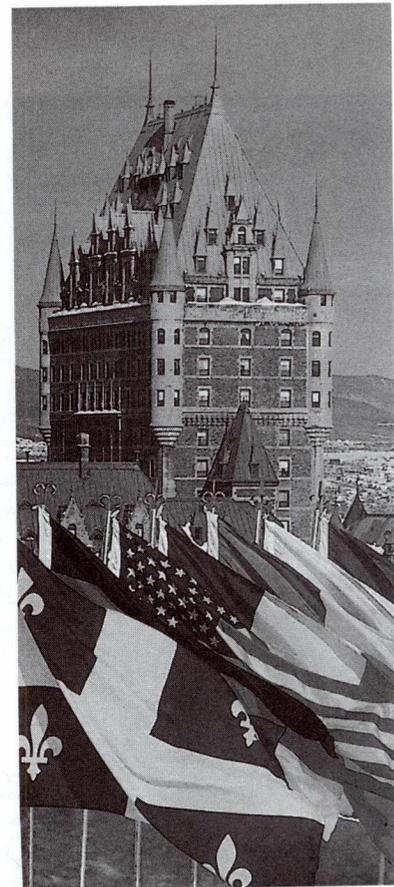
The Canadian situation may be succinctly explained by answering two questions: What is Canada's problem? and What does Quebec want?

I

For anyone living in a country like Mexico where the nation state was born when political sovereignty was achieved, with everything that this implies in terms of national symbols, the Canadian case may seem curious.

Canada becomes a country in the mid-nineteenth century with a law voted in the British parliament, although developed by the future Canadians. Canada did not achieve complete sovereignty then. When the British offered the

return of all governmental powers to the "white dominions" in 1931, the Canadians preferred to leave the power of amending their basic legislation in the hands of London, among other things, to avoid having to discuss the formula for amending the constitution. It is not until 1982, after the failure of several attempts at agreement between the federal government and the provinces, that the central government proceeded with—to use that curious piece of Canadian political jargon—"unilateral repatriation of the constitution," without the approval of the Quebec government. The two attempts at



Chateau Frontenac, a Quebec landmark.

Photos: General Delegation of the Government of Quebec in Mexico

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remedying this situation in the last few years have failed. Despite all this, the institutions work and the law is upheld.

Canada is also a federation built with the gradual addition of different provinces over a period of 80 years. Its enormous territory and scant population favored the development of strong provincial governments and a very particular logic of negotiation. It is not exaggerated to say that federal-provincial relations tend to occupy the center of the national political agenda: at stake are formal powers, programs and appropriations. Understanding Canadian politics means also understanding the abstruse technicalities of federalism.

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II

Closely linked to the curious process of Canadian national construction, the latent constitutional problem and the centripetal dynamic of an active federalism, Quebec's vigorous nationalism was consolidated centered on cultural and linguistic distinctions. In its inception, it was the defense mechanism of a clerical society, turned in on itself, with a marked tendency toward supporting the wrong causes internationally. Today, in contrast with

the image some of its adversaries would like to project, it is a secular movement, open to the outside world, inclusive and tolerant insofar as its nationalism permits. Essentially, its demand is based on the recognition of a collective identity.

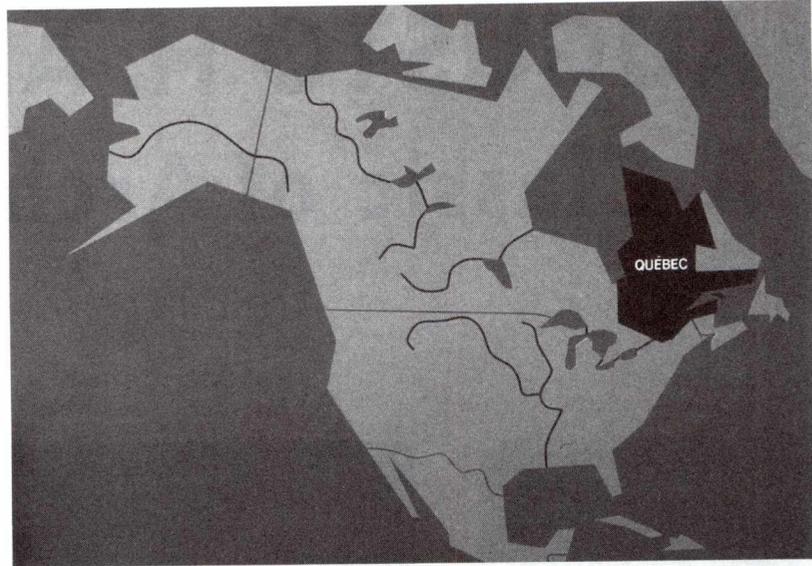
It has different political manifestations, often at odds with each other. On the one hand, there are those who support total political sovereignty for Quebec, combined with some form of economic association with Canada. They voted "yes" in the plebiscite. On



The Parliament building, seat of the Quebec National Assembly.

the other hand, there are those who support the recognition of some different kind of status for Quebec within the Canadian federation. Some of these people voted "yes", and many others voted "no." The majority of Quebec's French-speaking federalists are aware of the need to preserve the specificity of Quebecois culture: this is a constant demand in the negotiations between federal and provincial governments.

The outcome of the campaigns around the plebiscite was decided in the two weeks preceding the vote, with a fight for the undecided vote and for the soft underbelly of both options: the "sovereignists" who would be satisfied with a rearrangement of Canada's constitution and the federalists who think that Quebec society should be awarded longer-lasting guarantees. The leaderships of both the "yes" and the "no" camps had to readjust their campaigns to win over the majority of Quebecois in the center of the political spectrum. Even now, after an almost perfectly divided vote, it is that same majority which will end up deciding the future of Quebec in Canada, provided that the English-speaking provinces and the federal government present it with an attractive constitutional offer.



III

Last October's plebiscite threw into relief one of the paradoxes of the Canadian political system: even on the brink of disintegration, it is able to make its main actors, both in Quebec and in the rest of Canada, stick to shared values and procedures. At a moment in which the affirmation of nationalisms awakens uncontrollable instincts, Quebec's referendum was an example of democracy and of the institutional ability to process conflicts. This is one of the keys to the survival of Canada as a country: it is a very reasonable marriage of convenience.

Now the ball is in the court of the federal government and the English-speaking provinces. The con-

stitutional recognition of Quebec as a different society with a right to veto in cultural questions, with some powers that would allow it to retain its specificity and guarantees in the area of political representation would be enough for an important majority of Quebecois to express their preference for the Canadian federation. It is a proposal which has been discussed before and achieved almost unanimous approval in Canada's provinces. It is not strictly orthodox in terms of federalist theory, which presupposes the association of equal partners in everything, who delegate powers to a superior body of government; but, it is the price that Canada must pay to keep being a country. Sometimes Canadians forget that the construction of a country involves costs. If they are not ready to pay them, very probably after the next Quebec provincial election, there will be another referendum which will produce a solid majority in favor of Quebec sovereignty. ❧

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