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CANADA AFTER THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM

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On Monday, October 30, by a margin of only 50.6 percent to 49.4 percent, Quebec voters rejected a proposal that the province secede from Canada and become a sovereign country. Although Quebec will remain within Canada for at least a while longer, most *Quebecois*, including many who voted "no," remain very dissatisfied with the federal government in Ottawa. Unless Quebec and the rest of Canada can agree on a plan for constitutional change and devolution of powers, another sovereignty referendum will likely be held within five years. The major implications of the Quebec referendum are:

- 1 **Canada is entering a period of ongoing political instability.** The problem of Quebec's relationship to Canada has dominated Canadian government and politics for two decades, producing recurring crises. Had the federalists won decisively by duplicating their 60 percent to 40 percent victory in the 1980 referendum on the same issue, the Quebec sovereignty movement would have been dealt a lasting setback.¹ Had the sovereigntists won by even a slight margin, Quebec would have left Canada. However, the close margin guarantees that the divisive Quebec issue will remain front and center for several years.
- 2 **Prime Minister Jean Chretien is the big loser from the Quebec referendum.** As the campaign began, Chretien rejected Quebec Liberal leader Daniel Johnson's plan to offer the *Quebecois* constitutional change and instead defended the political *status quo*. In the final days after the federalists' large lead had vanished, Chretien reversed himself and promised to amend the Canadian Constitution to recognize Quebec as a "distinct society" by 1997, giving the province a special status and other constitutional privileges. Chretien has been criticized severely throughout the country for his handling of the referendum. Now he must negotiate with a province in which he is widely disliked, and must push an agenda he has spent his political career opposing, even as the country's many serious problems demand attention.

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1 Sovereigntists are those *Quebecois* who favor an independent Quebec. The *Bloc Quebecois* is a pro-sovereignty federal party with 53 out of 295 seats in Canada's House of Commons. The *Parti Quebecois* is a pro-sovereignty provincial party with a majority (77 out of 125 seats) in Quebec's provincial parliament, the National Assembly. Federalists are *Quebecois* that favor Quebec's remaining a province in Canada.

- ③ **Chretien may have “written a check that he cannot cash.”** While many Quebecois and English Canadians favor devolving power from Ottawa to the provinces, a majority of English Canadians oppose granting Quebec any special constitutional status. Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells, whose implacable opposition helped defeat the two previous attempts to placate Quebec through constitutional reform, the so-called Meech Lake Agreement in 1990 and Charlottetown Accords in 1992, has vowed to block any new effort to recognize Quebec as a “distinct society” in the constitution. Moreover, unlike 1985-1994 when a pro-federalist Liberal government ruled Quebec, the sovereigntist *Parti Quebecois* government has little incentive to reach a compromise with Chretien that would help keep Quebec within Canada. Consequently, Chretien will be hard-pressed to deliver on his promise to Quebec’s voters.
- ④ **Progress on reducing Canada’s large federal budget deficit will slow.** Chretien and the ruling Liberal Party had postponed effective action to deal with Canada’s severe fiscal problems, which are proportionately much greater than those of the U.S., because of the need to focus on the referendum. Fearing losses among Quebec voters, the Liberal caucus is likely to force Finance Minister Paul Martin to shelve plans to cut pension and unemployment benefits.
- ⑤ **Preston Manning, leader of the Reform Party, is a winner from the Quebec referendum.** Manning criticized Chretien for “woefully underestimat[ing] Quebec’s deep desire for change... trying to sell the *status quo*... and almost cost[ing] us the country.”² During the campaign, Manning tabled a “New Confederation” plan, based upon a radical devolution of powers from Ottawa, that could help to build a new consensus.
- ⑥ **Lucien Bouchard is also a winner.** *Bloc Quebecois* party chief and Leader of the Opposition in Ottawa, Bouchard emerged as the unchallenged leader of the Quebec sovereignty movement during the campaign. With the resignation of Premier Jacques Parizeau on Tuesday, October 31, the *Parti Quebecois* must elect a new leader to head the Quebec government. Bouchard and Vice Premier and Minister of International Affairs Bernard Landry are the leading candidates to follow Parizeau.
- ⑦ **Time favors the sovereigntists.** In the 1980 defeat, less than one-half of all French-speaking voters favored Quebec independence. Among age groups, a majority of those under 40 favored sovereignty, while a majority of those 40 and over opposed it. Fifteen years later, 60 percent of French-speakers favored independence, and the age dividing line had moved up to 55. Thus, opposition to sovereignty among the French-speaking population in Quebec is likely to decline as this group ages. Unless the rest of Canada can reach some mutually acceptable accommodation with Quebec in the next few years, population turnover foreshadows a future majority for secession. One countervailing force, however, is the large number of immigrants who have settled in Quebec in recent years and who voted heavily against sovereignty, a trend which is likely to continue.
- ⑧ **Early election likely.** Since Quebec law allows only one referendum on the same topic during the life of a National Assembly, the new Premier is likely to call new provincial elections next spring to gain a fresh mandate and allow him to call another sovereignty referendum at any time. Prime Minister Chretien or his successor may also call an early election to secure a mandate for dealing with Quebec.

2 From Question Time in the Canadian House of Commons, October 31, 1995.