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## QUEBEC'S 'WINNING CONDITIONS'

**Searching for meaning and an exciting national project, Quebeckers may well opt to follow the PQ into a new country, warns pollster MICHAEL ADAMS**

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The members of the Parti Québécois have spoken, electing as their new leader a young, handsome, gay, and post-cocaine André Boisclair, who has assured his supporters that a vote for him is a vote for a referendum "immédiatement" upon his moving across the aisle in the National Assembly. Charisma has now been redefined in postmodern Quebec.

If the low approval ratings of current premier Jean Charest persist in anything like their current proportions (about seven in 10 Quebeckers disapprove of the job Mr. Charest is doing), Mr. Boisclair will be elected. True, the two years (more or less) that stand between Mr. Boisclair's recent victory within his own party and a Quebec-wide election represent, in politician-years, 100 lifetimes.

But in Quebec, of course, elections are about more than individual candidates and specific policy priorities; the sovereignty debate looms over all else. And while many of us were looking the other way (at gas prices, international terrorism, softwood lumber, the Gomery inquiry and 1,000 other things), numbers that look a lot like what Lucien Bouchard called winning conditions have been accumulating in Quebec.

Back in 1985, half of Quebeckers we polled reported that their preferred constitutional option for Quebec was the status quo, while a combined total of 43 per cent favoured independence (9 per cent), sovereignty-association (16 per cent) or special status (18 per cent). This was five years after the first referendum on "sovereignty-association" (René Lévesque's felicitous addition to Canada's political lexicon), in which 40 per cent of Quebeckers voted Yes.

Then in 1987, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney decided to right the wrong of Quebec's voluntary exclusion from the 1982 patriated constitution by bringing Quebec into the constitutional fold with dignity and honour. At the government's Meech Lake resort he and the premiers ironed out an accord

acceptable to all of them but, as it turned out, not to all of the country's provincial legislatures; Meech Lake was sunk. Following both the failure of Meech in 1990 and the dramatic departure of Mr. Mulroney's Quebec lieutenant Lucien Bouchard from the Progressive Conservative Party (a departure which Mr. Mulroney now claims was a firing, but Mr. Bouchard maintains was a resignation on principle), support for the status quo in Quebec plummeted to 26 per cent. Meanwhile, support for the three sovereigntist options (special status, sovereignty-association, and outright independence) rose to nearly 70 per cent. Mr. Mulroney's next roll of the dice, the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord, failed in a national referendum in 1992 by a margin of 55 to 45, including - and most importantly - in Quebec.

The humiliating failure of Meech and the publicly rejected dog's breakfast that was Charlottetown set the table for Quebec premier Jacques Parizeau and the new Bloc Québécois leader Lucien Bouchard, elected to parliament in the 1993 federal election together with 53 of his sovereigntist colleagues. Mr. Bouchard and Mr. Parizeau both felt the time was right for Quebec's second referendum in 1995. Mr. Bouchard turned out to be a masterful campaigner and the Yes for some sort of sovereignty-association lost by only the narrowest of margins: 49.5 to 50.5. A sovereigntist victory would have been a roller-coaster ride into the unknown, although Jacques Parizeau has admitted recently that in his mind the end of that ride would have been outright independence.

The federal government, by now under Jean Chrétien's leadership, responded to the close call of 1995 with its Clarity Act in 1999, insisting sovereignty could not flow from a referendum on a "soft" question like those posed in 1980 and 1995. (It will not be surprising if whoever crafts the next referendum question does not send it to Ottawa for approval; who asks Dad for permission to run away from home?) In addition, the Chrétien government inaugurated a program to increase the profile of Canada and the federal government within Quebec. Canadians know how that story ended - or will when the Gomery inquiry releases the second volume of its report.

In a poll conducted by Environics in July 2005, support for the status quo in Quebec was back down to the lows seen after the failure of Meech (28 per cent). Two-thirds of Quebecers (66 per cent) support one of the three sovereigntist options. Added to these winning conditions is the weak position of both the federal and provincial Liberals in Quebec; even the addition of star candidates like spaceman Marc Garneau are unlikely to stem the tide toward the Bloc Québécois in the upcoming federal election campaign. If in Quebec the Liberals are a wounded lion, the Conservatives are a lion with one leg

amputated - the Quebec leg. A Conservative government in Ottawa - indeed any government in Ottawa - with no seats in Quebec would be unprecedented in Canadian history. This would be a surefire formula for constitutional disaster.

A vote on the soft question of sovereignty-association would, I believe, win 55 to 60 per cent of the vote were it to be held soon.

In a climate of aggravated resentment toward ROC, a new, charismatic leader like Mr. Boisclair, together with the now retired Lucien Bouchard, could reignite Quebec nationalism one more time - a nationalism that over the past 45 years has come to fill the spiritual void left in the wake of that province's precipitous rejection of Roman Catholicism. A generation of idealistic Quebec baby boomers have enjoyed their hedonism, but as the brilliant Quebec filmmaker Denys Arcand has shown so vividly, hedonism has not filled the spiritual and cultural void left by the Church. Politics might. Quebec nationalism, in the absence of any evocative Canadian version, could prove to offer sustenance to a distinct society in search of meaning and glue.

A referendum campaign deals with a binary, not nuance. It is a time when democracy is as direct as it ever gets in this country. Thumbs up or thumbs down. In Quebec, the turnout rate goes well beyond the 60 per cent we see in federal elections or the roughly 80 per cent we see in provincial elections. For sovereignty referenda, nearly everyone shows up. In 1995, 94 per cent of Quebeckers cast their ballot. When you go from a narrow majority voting to almost every eligible soul (most living, some dead), you include not just those aging baby boomers but their generally politically uninformed and disengaged children. For many of them a referendum is as much a party as a sober act of citizenship. They are filled with genetically coded personal optimism and even more than their parents are looking for spiritual meaning and an exciting national project, a project they feel is theirs. What does the Liberal Party - indeed, what does Canada offer young people who aspire not to be politicians in Ottawa or bankers in Toronto or foot soldiers in the American empire, but who merely want to be cool in Quebec?

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