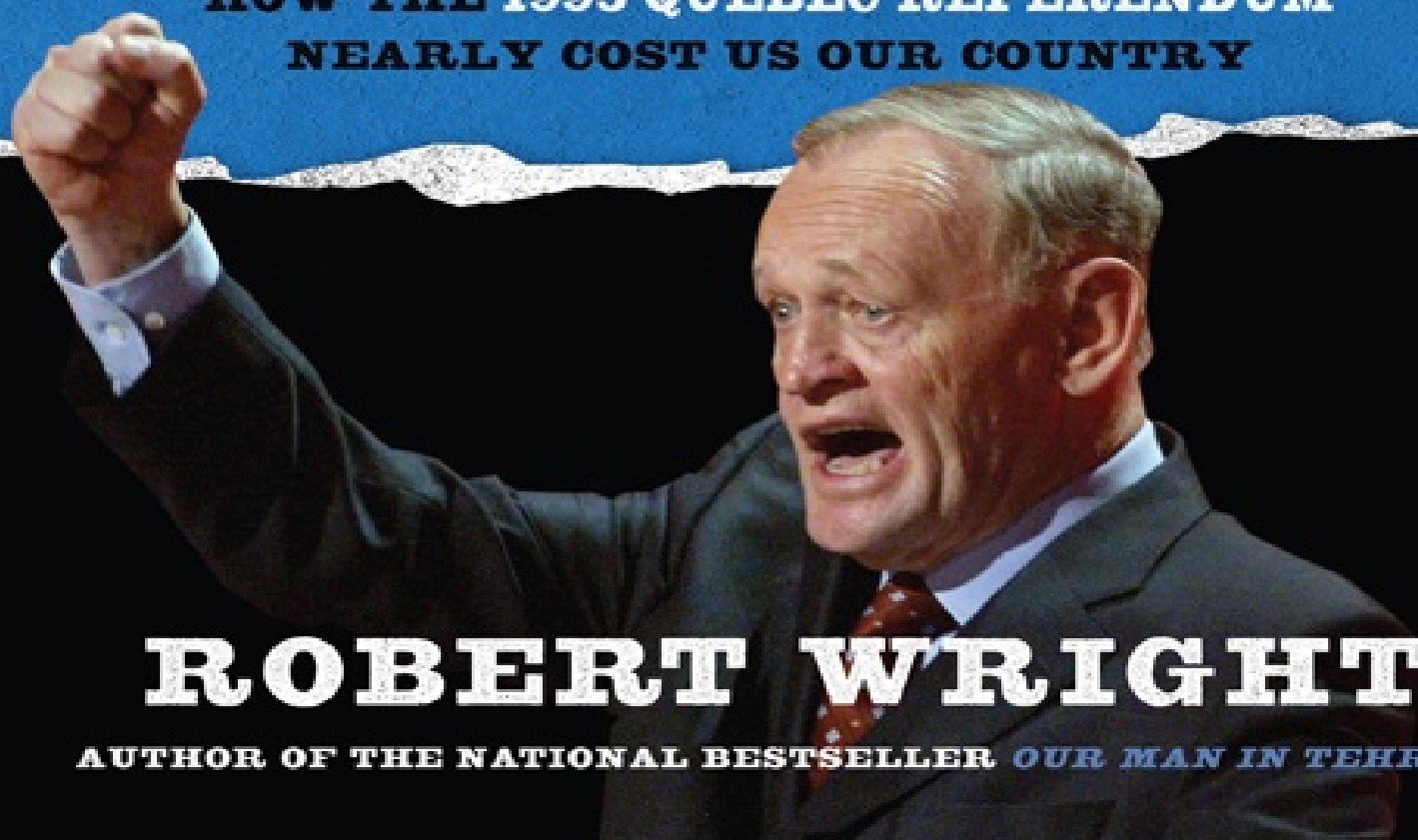




THE NIGHT CANADA STOOD STILL

HOW THE 1995 QUEBEC REFERENDUM
NEARLY COST US OUR COUNTRY



ROBERT WRIGHT

AUTHOR OF THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER *OUR MAN IN TEHRAN*



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 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

For Michael, Anna, Helena, and Laura

Epigraph

Le vrai Québécois sait qu'est-ce qu'y veut. Pis qu'est-ce qu'y veut, c't'un Québec indépendant, dans un Canada fort.

The real Québécois knows what he's after, and that's an independent Quebec in a strong Canada.

—YVON DESCHAMPS

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About the Publisher

The Night Canada Stood Still tells the story of the second Quebec referendum on sovereignty, held on October 30, 1995. (The first was held in May 1980.) The premise of this book is that the referendum debate was a national event not just for Quebecers but for all Canadians. I have therefore been mindful of three considerations: to get the story right, to treat all of its principal characters fairly, and to allow them to speak for themselves wherever possible. In case it is not immediately apparent, I write from the perspective of “earnest Upper Canadianism,” a term coined by John Duffy in Catherine Annau’s wonderful 1999 documentary film *Just Watch Me: Trudeau and the ’70s Generation*. When I reference the Anglo-Canadian “My-Canada-includes-Quebec crowd” in the pages that follow, readers should know that this is my crowd.

A note on sources. In contrast with my last two books, where the narratives tended to be hidden in once-secret documents, I found the story of the 1995 referendum to be hidden in plain view. The challenge was not the dearth of sources but rather the extraordinary abundance. Hundreds of thousands of words were spoken during the sovereignty debates in the National Assembly and the House of Commons, while the number of what we now call “hits” in the popular media ran into the tens of thousands. This book is, therefore, a work of analysis but also of synthesis. For ease of reading, I have taken two minor liberties with the text. I have standardized the spellings of terms like *Quebecer* and *sovereignist* wherever they appear. I have also closed extended excerpts without ellipses and square brackets in instances where I judged continuity and context to be unaffected. In every other respect the sources cited in the endnotes conform to established scholarly standards. There is no invented dialogue in this book. All translations from the original French are my own unless otherwise noted.

The Night Canada Stood Still could not have been written without the help of others. It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge them here.

Research funding was provided by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Symons Trust Fund for Canadian Studies, for which I am indebted. For putting themselves at my disposal early on in my research, I am grateful to Joe Clark, Edmond Chiasson, Heather Chiasson, Peter Donolo, Derek Lipman, Paul Daniel Muller, Eddie Goldenberg, Patrick Parisot, and John Rae. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my research assistants Rianna Genore, Kailey Miller, and Anna Harrington. Thanks as well to Ken Field and John Wales of the Trent Oshawa Library, to Karen Benacquista and Heather Gildner of the Toronto Public Library, and to R.K. Wright, Pat Wright, Lee Anne Farrow, Dennis Molinaro, Judy Cornish, Drew Taylor, Patricia Taylor, Rena Zimmerman, Amber Ashton, and Haile Wright.

The publication of *The Night Canada Stood Still* marks a decade of collaboration with my friend and editor Jim Gifford, whose tireless efforts on my behalf have introduced my work to a far broader audience than academic historians normally enjoy. Thanks to Jim and everyone at HarperCollins Canada, and to Noelle Zitzer, Allegra Robinson, Rebecca Vogan, and Lisa Rundle in particular.

Quebec MNA and cabinet member Jean-François Lisée, Professor Louis Balthazar, Professor David Sheinin, former ambassador Ken Taylor, and my brother Daniel Wright each read a manuscript draft of this book in its entirety, providing invaluable commentary and rescuing me from pitfalls large and small. For their unstinting generosity, I am deeply indebted. I need hardly add the standard authorial caveat. I have tried to bring balance and objectivity to the referendum story, but where I have failed, I have done so single-handedly.

My wife, Laura, and our children, Helena, Anna and Michael, spent more time living with the

project than they might have liked. As always, this book is for you, guys.

Free Falling

The morning of Tuesday, October 24, 1995, the phone rang in Jean Pelletier's Ottawa boardroom. Pelletier, a former mayor of Quebec City and now Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's chief of staff, was chatting amicably as he did almost every morning with a handful of Chrétien's senior political advisors. On the line, as usual, was John Rae from Montreal. This morning, Rae was the bearer of bad news. Quebec's second referendum on sovereignty in fifteen years was less than a week away, and overnight polling showed the sovereigntist Yes side leading by seven points. Eddie Goldenberg, Chrétien's senior policy advisor, glanced at Pelletier. Both men were plainly anxious. "We seem to be in free fall," Goldenberg observed bluntly.¹

No sooner had Rae hung up than Jean Chrétien rang. "Is there anything new this morning?" he asked.

"We have good news and bad news," said Goldenberg. "The bad news is that we are seven points behind. The good news is that everyone is counting on you to turn it around tonight."

"I guess that's why we are paid the big bucks," replied Chrétien.²

The prime minister hung up the phone and returned to the document on his desk, notes for a speech he would give that evening in the Montreal borough of Verdun. He had been up late the night before hashing out the major points of the address with Goldenberg and his press secretary, Patrick Parisien. Chrétien knew that some of the best speeches of his career had been unscripted. But not this time. "I was going to have to stick closely to the written text," he acknowledged. "This one was too important for me to risk flying without a net."³

Chrétien knew that the stakes were high. After months of polls showing that the No side would coast to victory, a *Toronto Star/La Presse* survey published on October 18 had stunned Quebecers and Canadians alike with the news that the two sides were in a virtual dead heat. "It's Neck and Neck" shouted the headlines, "*La Marée Haute du OUI*" (The High Tide of YES).⁴ The next day, October 19, the No camp's internal polling numbers revealed that the situation was, in fact, far more dire. "An overnight poll showed a dramatic reversal of fortune," Chrétien himself later recalled. "The Yes forces were now in the lead, 54–46, and the No side was in freefall. No one had a clue how to stop it."

To appease Quebec Liberal leader Daniel Johnson, the official *chef* of the No side, Chrétien had kept a low public profile in Quebec up to that point—even though his every instinct told him that he should be fighting tooth and nail for Canada. A majority of Quebecers would vote against separatism, Chrétien had reasoned, so there was no reason to paint a target on his own back. Now the sovereigntists had the wind at their backs. With just days to go in a vote that threatened to break up the country, Chrétien was determined to pull out all the stops. He told his subordinates to clear his calendar, even cancelling meetings with foreign leaders that had been on the books for months. "At last I was going to act on my basic instincts and plunge into the campaign," Chrétien resolved. "It was time to speak to the hearts of Quebecers."⁶

The last time Quebecers had voted in a referendum on sovereignty, in May 1980, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had been at the helm of the No forces. Jean Chrétien, then serving as the federal minister of justice, was Trudeau's main lieutenant. No one knew better than Chrétien that history could be an unforgiving taskmaster.

It is a widely accepted truth in Quebec that Trudeau's role in the 1980 referendum campaign was "notorious."⁷ Just six days before Quebecers went to the polls, he gave a dramatic speech at Montreal's Paul Sauvé Arena. There, with a stern, confrontational stare, his body language taut and resolute, his index finger stabbing insistently as he lashed out against his separatist adversaries, Trudeau promised that a No vote would be interpreted by the Government of Canada, the leaders of all three federal parties, the nine provincial governments outside Quebec, and all seventy-five Liberal MPs from Quebec as "a mandate to change the Constitution, to renew federalism." "I make a solemn declaration to all Canadians in the other provinces," Trudeau declared, his voice rising, "[that] we, the Quebec MPs, are laying ourselves on the line. We want change and we are willing to lay our seats on the House on the line to have change."⁸ It was one of the most electrifying speeches of his political career, and it sent shock waves through Quebec and Canada. When the referendum ballots were counted on May 20, 1980, Quebecers had voted 60–40 to reject René Lévesque's sovereignty-in-association option. Trudeau's Sauvé Arena speech was credited with having turned the tide.

But what had Trudeau meant by his promise to renew federalism? Had he changed his tune?

As prime minister, Trudeau had made no secret of the kind of political order he envisaged for Canada. He believed resolutely in a strong central government, in the equality of individuals and provinces, and in official bilingualism through which French Canadians could be *maîtres chez nous* anywhere in Canada. Trudeau had always said that, left to his own devices, he would repatriate the Canadian Constitution and introduce a charter of rights and freedoms. In contrast with a great many of his fellow Quebecers, he rejected any "two nations" conception of Canada, in which Confederation was understood as a pact between English and French Canadians. "I think particular status for Quebec is the biggest intellectual hoax ever foisted on the people of Quebec and the people of Canada," Trudeau said flatly.⁹

So what did he mean when he promised in May 1980 to put his own neck on the block for change?

Université Laval political scientist Guy Laforest is a committed sovereignist whose interpretation of Trudeau's Sauvé Arena speech would directly influence the course of the 1995 referendum debate. In his 1992 book *Trudeau et la fin d'un rêve canadien (Trudeau and the End of a Canadian Dream)*, Laforest claimed that the self-styled straight-shooter Trudeau had knowingly played fast and loose with Quebecers' sensibilities when he spoke about the need for change. For a full year before his Sauvé Arena speech—a period that included the federal election campaign of January and February 1980—Trudeau had said almost nothing about his own constitutional ambitions. Instead, he watched from the sidelines as two reports, the *Task Force on Canadian Unity* and the *Beige Paper* of the Quebec Liberal Party, transformed the conversation in Quebec about what it would actually mean to renew federalism. Both studies "advocated enshrining Quebec's specificity within the constitution and as such "gave expression to the conventional meaning of renewed federalism that had, in a certain sense, crystallized in Quebec during the years 1979–80."¹⁰ Pierre Trudeau understood this, according to Laforest; thus his appeal to Quebecers in his Sauvé Arena speech was one of coldly calculated ambiguity. With his vague but impassioned promise to "renew federalism," Trudeau had artfully hijacked the vocabulary of the Quiet Revolution. He had played on the hopes and dreams of Quebecers without any intention of ever realizing them.

In the minds of many Quebec sovereignists, Guy Laforest among them, everything Pierre Trudeau subsequently accomplished on the constitutional file—abetted at every turn by Jean Chrétien—followed from this initial deceit at the height of the 1980 referendum campaign. Trudeau's patriation of the Constitution without Quebec's consent was a betrayal, they say, a fundamental insult to the spirit of Confederation. November 4, 1981, is infamous among Quebec sovereignists as *la Nuit des Longs Couteaux* (the Night of the Long Knives), for that was the night Jean Chrétien and the nine

premiers from English Canada hammered out their patriation deal while Quebec premier René Lévesque slept. For Parti Québécois stalwarts like Jacques Parizeau, who would go on to become premier of Quebec and leader of the No side in 1995, these events amounted to treachery, plain and simple. Trudeau and Chrétien were sell-outs. “You remember the Night of the Long Knives,” Parizeau would say. “One day we will have to understand this method of using Quebecers in Ottawa to carry out designs, to achieve things that anglophones would not dare try to achieve on their own. These affairs are nauseating. We remember 1981, we remember the Night of the Long Knives. We are a people. We are a nation. We will decide what’s best for us. There is no one in the world who can deny us the right.”¹¹

Poring over his notes for the speech he would give at Verdun, Jean Chrétien was pensive. He knew better than anyone that Jacques Parizeau and his *péquistes* comrades had long memories. He knew that their dream of a sovereign Quebec had been built in part upon a reading of Canadian history that emphasized Quebecers’ “humiliation.” By plunging into the 1995 referendum debate at the eleventh hour, Chrétien faced a double risk. He might appear to be acting out of desperation, which would be a gift to the Yes side. Worse, he might be accused of pulling the same humiliating stunt that Trudeau had pulled in 1980. Chrétien understood that he would have to walk the knife edge. “I won’t make promises that I can’t keep after the referendum,” he confided to Eddie Goldenberg. “I won’t promise constitutional change. I don’t want to create the expectations that Trudeau, rightly or wrongly, created in 1980 at the Paul Sauvé Arena, and then find I’m not able to deliver. In the long run, that would be disastrous for the unity of the country.”¹²

The prime minister weighed his options. “In 1980,” he observed, “Trudeau had used his finest intervention to make a dramatic and remarkably personal pitch to the voters. I decided to adopt a more low-key tone in order to concentrate on two substantial issues. First I would assure Quebecers that their province would have a veto power over any future constitutional changes.”¹³ This was a concession to the established view in Quebec that it had always enjoyed an historic right of veto despite a 1982 decision of the Supreme Court of Canada to the contrary.¹⁴ “The second issue,” Chrétien continued, “the recognition of Quebec as a distinct society, was more fraught with difficulty. Most Canadians were still highly suspicious that ‘distinct society’ meant special powers for the government of Quebec. The phrase had become an important symbol for many Quebecers, however, and if it was what they needed to feel more respected and comfortable within Canada, it wasn’t much of a problem for me to offer it to them.”¹⁵

The prime minister was correct about one thing. The phrase *distinct society* had by 1995 become a potent touchstone for Quebecers and Canadians alike. But the odds that he could casually toss it out to disgruntled Quebecers in the final days of the referendum campaign and win their loyalty to Canada were long. The truth is that by October 1995 no one, not even Pierre Trudeau, had become more entangled in the thorny politics of *distinct society* than Jean Chrétien. In a sense, *distinct society* was precisely what the referendum was about.

Chrétien had famously been one of three Quebecers to welcome Queen Elizabeth II to Parliament Hill on April 17, 1982, where she signed into law Canada’s new Constitution and Charter of Rights and Freedoms. (Pierre Trudeau and André Ouellet were the other two.) A bitterly disappointed René Lévesque, still smarting from the Night of the Long Knives, led a protest march in the streets of Montreal on the same day. The phrase *distinct society* had been in use since the 1960s to highlight what was obvious to everyone, namely that Quebec was unique among the Canadian provinces and that its French language and culture were worthy of recognition and protection. But after the

windswept patriation ceremony of 1982, the phrase acquired a powerful new meaning. It distilled vast and complicated legal conversation about how to “bring Quebec back into the Canadian family” into a deceptively simple question: should Quebec be recognized in Canada’s Constitution as a distinct society and thus enjoy a constitutional prerogative to protect its French culture? After 1982, Canadian jurists, scholars, and philosophers would dissect the minutiae of Canada’s constitutional predicament with such intensity and elegance as to bring them international recognition.¹⁷ But for many ordinary Canadians, the issues were fairly straightforward. Could Quebec be recognized as a distinct society yet remain a Canadian province like all the others? And if so, would Quebecers, particularly those who did not speak French, still enjoy the rights enshrined in the Charter?

In the years between the patriation of 1982 and the referendum of 1995, the answers to these questions proved elusive, exasperating, and intractable, in that order. As Jean Chrétien himself had predicted, the words *distinct society* came to bedevil virtually anyone who dared utter them. *Distinct society* was the defining idea of the ill-fated Meech Lake Accord, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s effort to bring Quebec into the Constitution with “honour and enthusiasm,” and it had died in the provincial legislatures of Manitoba and Newfoundland in June 1990. The phrase *distinct society* also appeared in the follow-up Charlottetown Accord, which Canadians and Quebecers rejected soundly in referenda in October 1992. By the autumn of 1995, polls showed that public opinion in Canada had polarized. A majority of Quebecers thought *distinct society* was the least Canada should offer Quebec. An even larger majority of Canadians outside Quebec believed it was far too much. As former prime minister Joe Clark, the main architect of the 1992 Charlottetown Accord, lamented, “The word *special status* became a code, not to describe the enduring genius of Canadian Confederation, but to imply privilege for Quebec.”¹⁸

Jean Chrétien later suggested that the phrase *distinct society* was never the obsession for him that it had been for his political mentor. “Mr. Trudeau and I differed,” said Chrétien. “He insisted there wasn’t a single meaningless word in the Constitution. The expression *distinct society* creates a problem. This often happens in politics. Take, for example, same-sex unions. If you call it a *marriage*, you get a lot of opposition, but it doesn’t change anything in reality. The problem is with the word. These are battles that create illusions.”¹⁹

Would Chrétien be creating illusions if he went to Verdun and offered to recognize Quebec as a *distinct society*? He knew as he reviewed his notes that this was not merely a question of semantics. There was also his own political record to consider.

Jean Chrétien was “a founding father of the Charter,” as the *Globe and Mail*’s John Ibbitson had observed.²⁰ As a Quebecer, Chrétien was perfectly willing to acknowledge that Quebec society was *distinct*. “Everyone knows that I’m French when I speak in English,” Chrétien joked at the height of the 1995 referendum. “You don’t have to write it in the Constitution!”²¹ But as a statesman, he could never agree to a constitutional arrangement in which *distinct-society* provisions might allow the government of Quebec to override Canadians’ Charter rights.

In this respect, Chrétien’s position was principled, consistent, and identical to Pierre Trudeau’s. And it explains his take on constitutional reform in the years leading up to the 1995 referendum. Chrétien objected to the *distinct-society* clause in the original (1987) Meech Lake Accord because it appeared within the body of the Constitution in the form of a new Section 2, where, he believed, it could be used to undermine the Charter. During the federal Liberal leadership race against Paul Martin in 1990, he said that he could support an amended Meech, but only if the *distinct-society* clause was moved to the preamble, where it could do little harm. Two years later, Chrétien supported the Charlottetown Accord because the phrase *distinct society* appeared in an interpretive clause, not in the body of the Constitution.²² (Not surprisingly, this was also why most Quebec sovereignists rejected

Charlottetown and mobilized Quebecers to vote against it.) Chrétien paid a heavy price in Quebec for sticking to his principles in these years, even within his own party. At a 1990 Liberal leadership debate in Montreal, Paul Martin's supporters chanted "vendu" (sell-out) when Chrétien explained his position on Meech. After Chrétien won the party leadership, Liberal MP Gilles Rocheleau quit the party in disgust, publicly calling him "Quebec's Judas Iscariot." Such slurs hurt Chrétien deeply.

In his 2007 memoirs, Chrétien recounted a private conversation he had had with Pierre Trudeau in October 1992, just as the country was heading into the Charlottetown referendum. For two-and-a-half hours, the two friends debated the meaning of distinct society over dinner at Toronto's Royal York hotel.

"Jean, there are no words that mean nothing," Trudeau insisted.

"I don't know too many," replied Chrétien, "but these two mean nothing."

Trudeau tried his best to talk Chrétien out of supporting Charlottetown, but Chrétien held his ground. The two could agree only to disagree.

"You're the leader now, not me," Trudeau ended up saying, "so you have to live with some political realities that I can afford to ignore."²³

Now, in October 1995, with only a week to go in a referendum contest the polls said he was going to lose, Chrétien made a decision that he had dearly hoped he would never have to make. He would go to Verdun and open up Pandora's box. He would make a commitment to recognize Quebec as a distinct society, and he would offer Quebec a veto on constitutional change. Yes, the odds were long, but Canada hung in the balance. It was time to face the music.

Chrétien picked up the phone and called Pierre Trudeau.

"Is it true that we're losing, Jean?" Trudeau asked.

"Yes, we're behind and it's going to be close, but I'm confident we can turn it around if we work hard," Chrétien replied. "I may have to say something you won't like about distinct society and the veto."

"You're in charge," Trudeau affirmed. "Do what you think you have to do."²⁴

The Verdun Auditorium is an unremarkable barn-like arena on Boulevard Gaétan-Laberge in western Montreal. With its cement floors and wooden benches, it is indistinguishable from hundreds of similar structures that dot the Canadian landscape from Halifax to Whitehorse. Its raison d'être is not politics but heavy-metal concerts and hockey, a sport that has always been celebrated in Canada as a bridge between the two solitudes. It was perhaps fitting that the Canadian prime minister should endeavour to save the country in such a venue.

Word that Jean Chrétien would be speaking at Verdun the evening of October 24 energized the federalist ranks in Montreal as nothing had in weeks. By 7:15 p.m., an estimated 12,000 people had shown up to raise their voices in defence of Canada and cheer on the leaders of the No side. Seven thousand crammed into the arena—a thousand more than it had been built to hold. The rest waited in the rain-drenched parking lot and adjoining streets to watch the proceedings on video screens. Traffic was so heavy that Jean Chrétien, his wife, Aline, and several of his advisors hopped out of their car and walked the last several blocks through the rain to the auditorium. Along the way, they bumped into federal Tory leader Jean Charest and his wife, Michèle, and together they made their way through the sea of bodies to the side entrance.

"*Vive le Canada!*" yelled the crowd. The cool, muggy air was heavy with nervous anticipation.

“Everyone knew it was to be a crucial night,” Jean Chrétien later recalled, “full of high-stakes drama and high-octane emotions.”²⁵ Many of the ordinary Canadians who had turned out, like Montreal businessman Avrum Stark, said that they had been drawn by the grim polling numbers and the suddenly all-too-real possibility that Canada might break up. “It’s a very scary and emotional experience for me,” said Stark.²⁶ The prime minister himself, exhausted from anxious days and sleepless nights, seemed to draw energy from the enthusiasm and warmth of the crowd. Some spectators managed to reach through his security detail to wish him good luck. One of them was McGill University student Victor Debbas. “I just shook his hand and I’m proud of it,” said Debbas. “The whole idea of Canada is of a multiracial place where people get along, not separate. I don’t see why we’re splitting up.”²⁷ Grade 11 student Michelle Paiement was one of several students waiting patiently in the rain wrapped in a Canadian flag. “We can’t even vote and we’re here,” exclaimed Paiement. “We are the future of this country.”²⁸ “There’s no country in the world like Canada,” added France Héroux, a self-styled old-stock Quebecer who had driven down from Trois-Rivières. “Canada is like the promised land for the rest of the world. I’m proud to be a Canadian.”²⁹

The crowd streamed into the arena, many of them chanting “Ca-na-da!” and “Qué-bec!” and waving Canadian flags and *fleurs-de-lis*. The music of Céline Dion and Robert Charlebois blared on the PA. Short pro-Canada testimonials from Quebec sports stars, celebrities, and ordinary citizens looped on video screens. Some of the younger participants had painted flags on their faces and hair, evoking the atmosphere of a rock concert. The only emotion visible on the faces of older participants was anxiety; some visibly shell-shocked and barely able to keep their composure. Towards the front of the crowd stood federal finance minister Paul Martin and his cabinet colleague Lucienne Robillard, Chrétien’s hand-picked liaison on the No committee.

Rally organizers did their best to bring out the star power of the No leaders, with pounding music and intense spotlights. Like prize fighters entering the ring, Chrétien, Daniel Johnson, and Jean Charest were mobbed as they made their way slowly through the crowd to the stage. Camera crews roamed backstage as part of the province-wide television broadcast of the rally. When a cameraman trained his lens on Jean Chrétien just moments before he stepped up to the podium to deliver the evening’s first speech, viewers at home caught a glimpse of “near-panic” on his face, as historian Sylvie M. Beaudreau put it. “The cameras revealed what many Canadians feared was only too true: that the federalists were aware they could quite possibly go down to defeat and were making an extraordinary, desperate, and last-ditch effort to do whatever was in their power to prevent this from happening.”³⁰

The prime minister was greeted by thunderous applause as he took the stage. Behind him was a row of flags—alternating Maple Leafs and *fleurs-de-lis*—flanking a backdrop bearing the slogan of the No campaign, “*La Sépa NON ration?*” (the word *séparation* bisected by the word non). Looking out over the crowd, Chrétien’s face was a picture of sober intensity. For months, he had been supremely confident, almost cocky. “I’m not scared,” he had said over and over. “There’s no reason to be scared because I have the best product to offer, Canada.”³¹ Nothing remained of this blithe certitude. There was no evidence tonight of the famously populist Chrétien, the man of the people, *le p’tit gars de Shawinigan*. He did not smile at the crowd, or feign humility, or gloat. Standing purposefully, waiting for the applause to subside, Chrétien knew that he was standing in the white light of history as few world leaders had, the head of state of a country at the brink. Tonight’s speech was about one thing and one thing only: *rester ou partir*, to stay or to go. “As prime minister,” he began, “I bear a heavy responsibility ...”

With those words, it became clear that Chrétien intended to preach not to the converted but to those beyond, to the roughly 15 per cent of Quebecers whose political allegiances were “soft” and who

voting intentions remained undecided. He offered a thinly veiled *mea culpa*. “We are not being asked to choose a government or a premier that we will be able to vote out in four years’ time,” said Chrétien. “This is not a popularity contest in which certain individuals are better liked than others. This is a fundamental and irreversible choice of a country.” Chrétien knew that his public approval ratings in Quebec were abysmal. According to a recent SOM poll, only 13 per cent of Quebecers thought him the most trustworthy leader.³² There was no point in painting himself as Quebec’s saviour. He had cut right to the heart of the matter, which was saving Canada. “The breakup of Canada would be the failure of a dream,” Chrétien insisted. “It would be the end of a country that is the envy of all the world. It would be the failure of a country that is a model for countries in the process of building their own institutions. Canada is built on values that you know well: tolerance, generosity, respect for differences, social justice, and compassion. Quebecers share those values with all other Canadians. Next Monday, we will have to decide if we are prepared to give up on the country that embodies those values better than any other country in the world.”

The crowd responded warmly, some of them with tears in their eyes, as the prime minister segued to his own family roots in Quebec. “My friends,” he said solemnly, “I am a Quebecer proud of my language, my culture and my heritage. And I am also a Canadian who feels at home in every region of the country. Our ancestors, yours and mine, built a country in which the French language, culture and identity have been able to develop and assert themselves. They built a country in which Quebecers, regardless of any past injustices, now have the tools and the power to fulfill themselves. It’s true that this great country is not perfect. It’s true that it’s a country that must continue to adapt to modern reality; a country that can and must improve further—that is true. But it is a country worth fighting for, worth doing the impossible to preserve.”

And then came the moment of truth.

“I have listened to my fellow Quebecers throughout this campaign saying that they are deeply attached to Canada. But they’ve also been saying that they want to see this country change and evolve toward their aspirations. They want to see Quebec recognized as a distinct society within Canada by virtue of its language, culture and institutions.” As the phrase *société distincte* passed his lips, the crowd erupted into cheers. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again,” Chrétien continued, after a brief pause. “I agree. I have supported that position in the past, I support it today, and I will always support it, whatever the circumstances.” Again the crowd erupted into cheers and whistles.

The prime minister concluded his speech with a poignant quotation from former Quebec premier Jean Lesage. “*Le Canada c’est mon pays, le Québec c’est ma patrie*” (“Canada is my country, Québec is my homeland”). Then with a sharp “*Merci beaucoup*, thank you very much!” he stepped back from the podium to let the applause of the audience wash over him. He had ended the speech as he had begun it, seriously, earnestly, a man on the edge. There was no triumphalism in his final waves and nods to the crowd, no relief. His searching gaze and fitful stance gave every impression that he did not know whether his speech had succeeded or failed.

A woman at the front of the stage handed Chrétien two red roses. He grasped the flowers, gave a final wave, and descended the stairs into the crowd.

The next morning, Wednesday, October 25, the federal Liberal caucus met in Ottawa. MP Janice Stewart chaired the meeting. She later recalled the dramatic moment when Jean Chrétien appeared at the door. “When I saw him come into the caucus room, my visceral response was dramatic. I started to shake and feel sick to my stomach. The look I saw was one I know, stress and perhaps panic. I felt like crying.”³³

Stewart did not exaggerate. Visibly anxious, emotional, beaten down—this was a Jean Chrétien Liberal MPs had never seen. The mood in the room was sombre, even fractious. Many MPs were beside themselves about the referendum polls, and they blamed the prime minister and his advisors for sidelining them in a disastrous top-down campaign that now threatened the country. “I sympathized with those MPs and ministers who felt they were being forced to stand by and watch the great country fall apart without being able to do anything about it,” Chrétien himself later recalled.³⁴

Some of those MPs had already read journalist Lysiane Gagnon’s devastating *La Presse* column from that morning. The rally in Verdun had been nothing but an “epiphenomenon,” wrote Gagnon. “It was too little, too late. Weeks and years too late. The evening brought nothing new. For federalists in Quebec, it was a pathetic admission of weakness.”³⁵ Within hours, Gagnon’s words would reverberate throughout Quebec and Canada. As many Liberals anticipated, opposition Bloc Québécois MPs would be only too happy to throw Gagnon’s words in Chrétien’s face. “At the very last minute, a panicked Prime Minister of Canada has entered the referendum campaign with empty hands,” Bloc MP Jean Lapierre would tell the House of Commons that very afternoon. “It is too little, too late. Quebecers will not be fooled; they will vote Yes next Monday.”³⁶

The prime minister addressed the caucus. His tone was one of bitter resignation. Nothing remained of the bravado that had carried him aloft through most of the campaign.

Lies and personal attacks had given the separatists momentum late in the campaign, Chrétien fumed, in no small measure because an obliging national press had published “the big pile of shit.” It was absurd, he railed. At one point in his speech, Chrétien faltered in mid-sentence, tears welling up in his eyes. “I choked up when I reflected on the indecency of being called a traitor to my people,” he later admitted.³⁸ The prime minister paused and turned from the lectern. Jane Stewart embraced him. Others in the room—Brian Tobin, David Dingwall, David Collenette, Sergio Marchi, Christine Stewart—felt their hearts sink and their eyes water. Never had they seen Jean Chrétien, the famed political brawler, so despondent.

After a few moments, Chrétien regained his composure and continued with his remarks, trying his best to rally his troops in the home stretch of the campaign.

“Remember we live in the best country in the world,” he said.³⁹

His speech concluded, the prime minister and his caucus filed dejectedly out of the meeting and back to their parliamentary offices. They knew they had but four-and-a-half days to try to avert disaster, to put the missteps of the campaign behind them and appeal to the people of Quebec to think twice about voting to leave Canada.

They put a brave face on the challenges before them, girding themselves for the fight of their lives. But alongside their resolve remained confusion, bitterness, and fear.

How, they wondered, had it ever come to this?

Ottawa, 1993

As it happened, Jean Chrétien's tearful caucus meeting fell on the second anniversary of his resounding 1993 electoral victory. What should have been an occasion for celebration—the Liberal Party's biggest landslide since 1949—had become instead a scene of recrimination and doubt.

For two years, the Liberal government had stood idly by and watched as Quebec sovereignists had painstakingly resuscitated the dream of an independent French-speaking state in North America, a dream that even many diehard Quebec separatists believed had died with René Lévesque. Appealing to Quebecers' resentment over Meech and Charlottetown, overcoming their own deep schisms, and producing a roadmap for sovereignty they believed even moderate Quebec nationalists could support, the sovereignists' had exceeded not only Jean Chrétien's expectations but their own.

Some Canadians mused that Chrétien was powerless to stop the sovereignist juggernaut. He was the right man at the wrong time, they said. History was against him. But as the prime minister and his dejected comrades filed out of their gloomy caucus meeting at noon on October 25, 1995, the point was moot. The simple truth was that he hadn't even tried.

The federal election of 1993 is best remembered for nearly obliterating the ruling Progressive Conservatives and for ushering in Jean Chrétien's decade-long "friendly dictatorship."¹ The Liberals won 177 out of 295 seats, the outgoing Tories only two. The New Democrats, led by Audrey McLaughlin, were reduced from forty-three seats to nine.

The Liberal sweep was a triumph for Jean Chrétien and the "natural-governing party," but seen from the perspective of national unity, it was an ominous fork in the road for Canada. The sovereignist Bloc Québécois became the Official Opposition with fifty-four seats, all of them in Quebec. The populist Reform Party took fifty-two seats, all but two of them west of Manitoba. The Liberals took only nineteen of seventy-five seats in Quebec—a sea change in Canadian political history, given that every French-Canadian prime minister before Chrétien had won overwhelmingly in Quebec. (The last French-Canadian prime minister before Jean Chrétien was Pierre Trudeau, and in his final election, in 1980, Trudeau had swept Quebec with seventy-four seats.) The rise of Reform and the Bloc revealed that the chickens of regional alienation had come home to roost. All of a sudden, the national conversation was a lot less national.

During the 1993 campaign, Jean Chrétien adopted a "Don't worry, be happy" approach to national unity. "We had made the constitutional status quo an element of our election program," Eddy Goldenberg later recalled. "Mr. Chrétien had made it clear that the Constitution, on a priority list of 100 priorities, was 101."² Chrétien sensed that Canadians were suffering from constitutional fatigue and wanted their government to deal with the sputtering economy, unemployment, and the mounting debt crisis. Brandishing his famous *Red Book* to great effect, he offered Canadians a platform of economic reforms that would restructure costly social programs, balance the books, and pull the country out of recession. "If you want to talk about the constitution," Chrétien said on the campaign trail, "don't vote for me!"³

Behind this cheeky remark lay Chrétien's bedrock conviction that Quebecers would never vote to break Canada up. "Canadian federalism is more than a form of government," Chrétien would say. "It is also a system of values that allows different people in diverse communities to live and work together."

in harmony for the good of all. Will independence bring a better form of government for the people of Quebec? In my opinion, no. Will it bring more peace? No. More prosperity? No. More justice? No. Even a better chance for the survival of the French language and culture in North America? Again, no. The fact that Quebec is part of Canada makes a big contribution to Quebec—and to Canada as well.”⁴

With the ashes of Meech and Charlottetown still smouldering and the country fresh out of constitutional fixes, Chrétien reassured Canadian voters that federalism could evolve, practically and to everyone’s advantage, without reopening the Constitution. This was a lesson that he believed Canadians had learned from Brian Mulroney’s roll of the dice. “I thought Mulroney was wrong to have reopened the constitutional file,” Chrétien later recalled. “In general, I felt that changing the Constitution is a distraction from dealing with the practical issues of the day, something to be undertaken only when all other options have failed.”⁵ In this sense, Chrétien had imbibed one of his mentor’s most famous dictums. “Canada is a success, looking for a problem,” Pierre Trudeau liked to say. “We are a united people divided by our leaders.”⁶

On one level, Jean Chrétien’s instincts heading into the 1993 campaign proved correct. The Canadian economy was indeed in the tank, and Canadians were almost uniformly anxious about it. Terms like *globalization*, *outsourcing*, and *debt clock* entered the Canadian lexicon for the first time. Everyone understood that the reforms necessary to retool the Canadian economy were structural. That meant they were going to hurt.

But Chrétien’s refusal to talk about the Constitution played into the hands of Quebec sovereigntists who spoke of little else. Foremost among them was Lucien Bouchard, the former Mulroney Tory who had launched the Bloc Québécois in 1990 and personified its meteoric ascent in federal politics. Bouchard had no formal platform document, no *Red Book*, in 1993. He didn’t need one. He agreed with Chrétien that Canada’s endless constitutional wrangling was a dead end but interpreted this to mean that Quebecers had no choice but to chart an independent course. His campaign objectives were straightforward: he would promote Quebec sovereignty, prepare English-speaking Canada for the inevitable, and defend Quebec’s interests in Ottawa in the meantime.⁸

Sensing that the Tories were a spent force, Bouchard aimed his formidable rhetorical skills at Chrétien, who, he liked to say, “represented everything I abhorred about politics.”⁹ Out on the hustings, Bouchard was merciless. “Each time Quebec gets a good slap in the face, if you scratch a little, you’ll find Jean Chrétien,” he told Quebec voters.¹⁰ “Chrétien cannot claim, as Trudeau did, to represent Quebec. For Québécois, the most decisive thing to come out of the dual failure of Meech and Charlottetown has been this: English-speaking Canadians, out of respect for their own national identity, out of loyalty to their vision of Canada, have refused to make any concessions to Quebec.”¹¹

Many Canadian anglos scratched their heads in wonder at Bouchard’s sweeping claims, but many francophone Quebecers seemed to be receptive. In 1991, the upstart Bloc had claimed the loyalty of only 18 per cent of Quebecers. Yet on election night, October 25, 1993, the party took an extraordinary 49 per cent of the popular vote in Quebec. Exit polls showed that Quebecers’ attitudes toward sovereignty directly influenced their votes, and that those attitudes were “strongly correlated” with their personal feelings about Bouchard.¹²

Whether or not Quebecers bought Bouchard’s particular diagnosis of Canada’s constitutional ills, they handed the Bloc virtually every francophone seat in the province, putting in motion an inexorable challenge to the rest of Canada. “Within two years, a referendum on sovereignty will ask Québécois to cut the Gordian knot,” Bouchard announced in the aftermath of the election. “This will also be the moment of truth for English Canada.”¹³

Lucien Bouchard once mused that when historians turned their thoughts to the 1995 Quebec referendum, Premier Jacques Parizeau would occupy centre stage. “I’ll be a footnote,” he said.¹⁴ No sound bite better encapsulates the deep and ultimately irreconcilable contradictions Bouchard has come to personify in the mid-1990s. Many francophone Quebecers revered him as a principled and dedicated servant of their national hopes and dreams. An equal number of English Canadians thought of him a fickle and ambitious megalomaniac whose claims to modesty were transparently false.

Lucien Bouchard was born in Saint-Cœur-de-Marie, in 1938, and raised in Jonquière in the Saguenay region of Quebec. Like Jean Chrétien, who was born almost five years earlier in Shawinigan, north of Trois-Rivières, Bouchard came from a family whose origins were humble, isolated, and rooted deeply in traditional Québécois culture. Bouchard’s mother, Alice Simard, once famously told a journalist that she had no opinion of English Canadians because she had never met any. Like Chrétien, Bouchard earned a law degree from Université Laval and—also like Chrétien—did not learn English until he was well into adulthood. In contrast with the populist Chrétien, who projected a gregarious and self-effacing *habitant* persona, Bouchard came across as a priest, antiquarian and a loner. In this respect, he was much like Pierre Trudeau—introspective, intense, self-contained, a man who conveyed the impression that he took his greatest pleasure in the company of books rather than people. As with Trudeau, Bouchard’s commanding physical presence, brooding good looks, and love of language would give him an almost professorial standing among his allies and followers. But in contrast with Trudeau’s cultivated cool, Bouchard had a volatile temperament that erupted regularly into incendiary rages. He was easily humiliated, as he admitted himself, and he wore his torments on his sleeve. When Lucien Bouchard fumed about the humiliation Quebecers suffered at the hands of English Canadians, it was not political posturing. His humiliations and Quebecers’ were inextricably linked, and he felt both intensely.

Politically, Bouchard had sampled the entire buffet available to Quebecers of his generation. He joined the Parti libéral du Québec (PLQ) in the 1960s but defected to René Lévesque’s Parti Québécois in 1971, in part because of his distaste for the Liberals’ handling of the 1970 FLQ crisis. Much to the disbelief of some of his sovereignist friends, Bouchard agreed to write speeches for his old law-school friend Brian Mulroney in the lead-up to the 1984 federal election. Some of Mulroney’s most memorable campaign appeals to Quebecers, including his promises to right the wrongs of Trudeau’s 1982 repatriation, were, in fact, penned by Bouchard. After Mulroney’s landslide victory, the Tory leader rewarded Bouchard by appointing him Canada’s ambassador to France. Once he had returned from Paris, in 1988, Bouchard was persuaded by the prime minister to run as a Tory in a La Saint-Jean by-election. He won handily, joining the cabinet as Mulroney’s Quebec lieutenant and later as minister of the environment. Though Bouchard’s reputation as a passionate Quebec nationalist never flagged, Canadians could have been forgiven for believing that his rehabilitation as a federalist was complete.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, on May 22, 1990, as the clock ticked down on the June 23 deadline to ratify the Meech Lake Accord, Bouchard made the dramatic announcement that he was resigning from the cabinet. Without a word to anyone on the inside, he severed all connections with the Tory party and with Brian Mulroney personally.

To this day, the circumstances surrounding Bouchard’s resignation remain in dispute, including the basic question of whether he quit or was fired. The pretext for the breach was Mulroney’s eleven-hour decision to renegotiate Meech on the basis of recommendations made by Bouchard’s cabinet colleague Jean Charest. Bouchard claims that his position on Meech never wavered throughout 1989 and 1990. He always insisted that the accord had to be accepted *as is*—that is, as written and endorsed by the eleven first ministers in 1987.¹⁵ Yet it was Bouchard himself who had asked the “brilliant

young lawyer” Charest to strike up a special committee when it became clear that the original accord was at risk of not being ratified in some of the provincial legislatures.¹⁶ How Bouchard could later claim to be outraged by the Charest Report remains a mystery to both Charest and Mulroney. Bouchard was certainly outraged. “I could not believe my eyes,” Bouchard later wrote. “The strategy and positioning of the government of which I had been a part for more than two years had finally been revealed to me: The 1987 accord had been downgraded to nothing more than a negotiation paper accommodating the shopping list of each of the other provinces.” Jean Charest could not believe his eyes, either. He heaped scorn on Bouchard, calling his resignation “meticulously planned treachery.” An equally bitter Brian Mulroney swore that he would never forgive Bouchard for stabbing him in the back at such a critical moment in Canadian history, and he never has. “He had fabricated every word of his story,” Mulroney later wrote of Bouchard’s high-minded rationalization for quitting the government. “He had conspired with [Jacques] Parizeau at least two weeks beforehand to betray me.”¹⁸

Freed of his obligations to his federalist friends, Bouchard retreated into the world of the Quebec sovereignists. He was not alone. When Meech died, on June 22, 1990, a group of five disaffected Quebec MPs—Benoît Tremblay, Gilbert Chartrand, Nic Leblanc, Louis Plamondon, and François Gérin—followed Bouchard out of the Tory party, intent on fashioning some new enterprise dedicated solely to the interests of Quebec. They were joined in short order by two Liberal MPs from Quebec, Jean Lapierre and Gilles Rocheleau, who were equally disillusioned by the loss of Meech but who also held their own leader, Jean Chrétien, in contempt. “I feel sad, humiliated and betrayed,” warned Lapierre. “For those who thought that Meech was too much, take note that from now on it is not enough.”¹⁹

Thus was born the Bloc Québécois, which, in only three years, would channel the dreams and resentments of disaffected Quebec voters into such a potent political coalition that it would, in 1994, form Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition. Every step of the way, it was Bouchard himself who played the leading role, powerfully articulating the *Bloquistes’* vision, piloting his new party to ever more commanding heights, and readying his troops for the referendum battle that would, as he liked to say, lance the constitutional abscess once and for all. “The sovereignist avant-garde will displace yesterday’s federalist allies,” Bouchard said. “The Bloc will be the enveloping wing of the sovereignist advance. For a change, we will be united rather than divided: sovereignist in Quebec, federalist in Ottawa. A referendum on sovereignty is a prerequisite to the success of this strategy. Nothing can exempt Québécois from making their decision.”²⁰

Bouchard’s instincts for the aspirations and agonies of Quebecers proved impeccable, then and later. Quebec was his *patrie*, his homeland, and he had absorbed its cultural and political rhythms by osmosis as well as by careful study. “They feel they form a nation,” Bouchard would say of the Québécois, “one that is predominantly francophone, to which they pledge their primary loyalty. They have long recognized in the various elements that make up a state the attributes of a country: state territory, loyalty, people, and culture.”²¹ He was correct about this, of course. And when he was not trying to score cheap political points, he would quietly acknowledge that many of his nominal adversaries saw themselves as citizens of that same nation. “We must never forget that Quebec federalists are nationalists like us,” Bouchard told journalist Paul Wells in 1994. “That they share the same notions. That there is no difference, fundamentally, between the nationalism of Robert Bourassa and that of Jacques Parizeau. That both of them—and René Lévesque, Jean Lesage, Daniel Johnson S. —wanted Quebec to develop as its own collectivity.”²²

Bouchard’s great gift—what so many Quebecers came to love about him during the referendum campaign—was his ability to articulate a prudent, achievable sovereignist vision for Quebec, in which

everyone could find a place and make a contribution. There was no hint of radicalism in anything I said or wrote, nothing intimidating, nothing even to suggest that one country would have to be broken up to give rise to another. “Quebec will be what we make it,” said Bouchard. “We have the tools to form a dynamic country with a window on the world: an efficient economic structure, a moderate government, a responsible and hardworking population, natural resources, the capacity to adapt with flexibility and cohesion to the globalization of the economy. Everything depends on our solidarity, energy, and collective discipline. In other words, everything depends on us.”²³ After the achievement of sovereignty, Bouchard assured Quebecers, they would sit down amicably with English Canada and negotiate a new bilateral treaty, along the lines of what he called *le modèle européen* (the European model).²⁴ “Our mutual interests will require us, Canadians and Québécois, to define in a responsible way, from the point of view of our respective sovereignty, the relationship that geography, economics, and history are asking us to preserve.”²⁵ There was nothing to fear in such a future, he said, for either side. “Quebec sovereignists do not consider Canada an enemy.”²⁶

Bouchard would repeat this beguiling message, without variation, until the day Quebecers cast their referendum ballots. “The negotiations [with Canada] will be done with extraordinary calm,” Bouchard told a Yes rally in mid-October 1995. “It will be done with serenity. Because we have the weight of the people we won’t need to yell. We only need to talk.”²⁷

These heady appeals to Quebecers’ sense of nation resonated deeply, but as Bouchard had recently defected from the Mulroney Tories, his leap of logic from nationalism to outright secessionism was less surefooted and, ultimately, less convincing. Yes, Quebecers enjoyed many of the attributes of nationhood, but was it really the case, as Bouchard claimed after the death of Meech, that Quebec “is in fact, a country that is being artificially kept within the Canadian country”?²⁸ Some hard-line Quebec separatists expressed doubts about Bouchard’s *souverainiste* convictions, then and later. So did many Quebec federalists and an even larger number of English Canadians. They wondered, not without justification, whether Bouchard believed such statements himself. *Toronto Star* columnist Richard Gwyn, for example, dismissed Bouchard as a “bolter” for his apparent lack of loyalty to either people or principle. “Bolters don’t think,” wrote Gwyn. “They just rear up and head off.”²⁹ Less sympathetic observers called him a shameless opportunist, a dangerous demagogue, and worse.

Bouchard got himself in even hotter water with English Canadians when he presumed to speak for them. In marked contrast to some of his worldly and well-travelled compatriots—Pierre Trudeau and Jacques Parizeau, for example—Bouchard had not set foot outside Quebec until he was an adult. Until then, English Canada was for him a *terra incognita*, a place he had only ever read about. His instincts for the country that lay beyond his home province were thus not only poorly developed but also skewed towards old-fashioned stereotypes. “English-speaking Canadians condemned Meech,” Bouchard wrote in 1994, “because it threatened the idea they had of their country. The country they carry in their minds and hearts is the present Canada, in which English is clearly predominant and which admires and is nostalgic for the British Crown, institutionalized and personified in a central state.”³⁰ *Nostalgic for the British Crown? Central state?* Many Canadian anglos were rightly incredulous. The last serious national conversation about Canada’s British connection had been the flag debate of 1964. And as every prime minister since Lester Pearson could attest, a steadily lengthening list of provincial prerogatives, many of them originating in Quebec, had taken Canada far further down the path of decentralization than some would have preferred to go.

More than this, there was something mischievous and uncharitable about Bouchard’s ill-informed generalizations. For the many English Canadians who had voted for federal parties led by Quebecers

supported official bilingualism and Charter-based language rights, enrolled their kids in French immersion, and celebrated a tolerant and inclusive Canada they believed was the envy of the world. Bouchard's words savoured strongly of propaganda. When he presumed to tell Canadians that the "natural incompatibility" of Canada and Quebec "prevents common economic policies and authentic national enterprise," they wondered if he was describing the Canada of their grandparents of Hugh MacLennan's 1945 novel *Two Solitudes*, a Canada yet to be transformed by the Quiet Revolution.

Indeed, Bouchard's limited appreciation of Canadian anglos made his own work as Bloc leader more challenging, since he felt an obligation to acquaint them with the mysteries of modern Quebec. "English-speaking Canadians need to know the intensity, determination, and objectives of the sovereigntist vision," Bouchard wrote in 1994. "Someone has to tell them that, contrary to the reassuring speeches from official sources, Quebec has not been anaesthetized. There is broad consensus for a referendum on sovereignty. If we were to keep our Canadian friends in ignorance under a false sense of security, we would be setting them up for some nasty surprises. They must be prepared for a referendum whose outcome will be favourable to sovereignty."³¹ *Anaesthetized?* In the face of such condescension, many anglos rightly wondered how many "Canadian friends" the Bloc leader actually had left. But there was a larger issue. When Bouchard claimed that there was "broad consensus for a referendum," was he not obscuring the hard reality that there was no consensus with Quebec on sovereignty itself? Even after the Bloc's 1993 election triumph, poll after poll showed that only 43 to 45 per cent of Quebec voters supported "sovereignty" and an even more paltry 35 to 38 per cent supported "independence."³² Given that a sizeable majority of Quebecers still appeared to prefer Canada to any sovereigntist alternative, English Canadians' sense of security was patently neither ignorant nor false.

Bouchard's most serious misreading of Anglo-Canadians—one that would have an incalculable impact on Quebecers as they considered their referendum options—was to imagine that they somehow formed a coherent political entity independent of Quebec. "If there is a people," Bouchard told Quebecers repeatedly, "it's English-Canada because they too have built between themselves deep links of solidarity, great emotion and the country they share they feel in their hearts."³³ To be fair, the deceptively simple idea was not Bouchard's alone. After the death of Meech, in fact, it crystallized into the acronym ROC, meaning the "rest of Canada" or "Canada outside Quebec," thus becoming part of the country's constitutional shorthand. The simplicity of the concept was deceptive because, as constitutional authorities like Professor Alan C. Cairns took pains to remind Canadians throughout the 1990s, *there was no Canada without Quebec*. "The Rest-of-Canada," said Cairns, "enjoys only a shadowy existence. It is the empty chair at the bargaining table. The structural reason for this absence of voice and incapacity for introspection is obvious. The Rest-of-Canada has no institutional constitutional existence, and thus has no one with authority to speak for it. It is headless and therefore officially voiceless."³⁴ Most ordinary Canadians were not reading the growing mountain of academic literature on the constitutional impasse, of course. They didn't have to. A ubiquitous bumper sticker said it all: "My Canada includes Quebec."

Some of Bouchard's federalist critics, Jean Chrétien among them, accused him of conjuring up the spectre of a united, arrogant, and ultimately obdurate English Canada to win the hearts and minds of undecided Quebec voters. There is certainly some truth in this claim. Bouchard routinely asserted on one breath that English Canada had callously torpedoed Meech and in the next that if Quebecers did not support the push for sovereignty, the same English Canada would happily trample their rights again and again. But the historical record suggests that Bouchard actually believed what he said about the unity and purpose of English Canadians, and that once he became the leader of the Bloc

Québécois, his essentially binary conception of Canada versus Quebec was genuine.

In this sense, Lucien Bouchard projected his own deeply personal experience of Quebec nationalism onto the rest of Canada: Anglo-Canadians would respond to Quebec sovereignty, he believed, exactly as he would do in their place. In so doing, he handed Quebecers—even disillusioned federalists—a powerful incentive to play hard ball with English Canada, without reservation or remorse, just as he had done with his old friend Brian Mulroney.

“By the time I arrived in Ottawa in 1993,” Reform Party leader Preston Manning later reflected, “I had long considered ways to cope with the threat of secession.”³⁵

Such certitude could only have struck Prime Minister Jean Chrétien as cold comfort, coming from the man who had come to personify the Anglo-Canadian stereotype that Lucien Bouchard found so loathsome. The unilingual Manning was fed up with Quebec’s special pleading and the federal government kowtowing to it. His grassroots contact with thousands of Canadians gave him “a better grasp than any other federal leader on the growing frustration in the rest of Canada,” he later claimed. “It was not just the future of Quebec that was being decided by the Quebec referendum but the future of all of Canada and Canadians in the rest of Canada wanted a say.”³⁶ Manning had resolutely opposed the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords, arguing that the granting of distinct-society status to Quebec violated the bedrock principle of the equality of the Canadian provinces. If Quebecers could not abide by the rule of democracy, he stated bluntly in 1994, then “Quebec and the rest of Canada should openly examine the feasibility of establishing a better but more separate relationship between them.”³⁷ Jean Chrétien drew the obvious conclusion. “My suspicion,” said Chrétien, “was that Manning knew he could never become prime minister of Canada because of Quebec and, consequently, that he wouldn’t have been terribly sorry to see it leave the federation.”³⁸

Preston Manning’s ascent in federal politics had been as meteoric as Lucien Bouchard’s, yet another by-product of the collapse of the Mulroney Tories. From a meagre one-seat foothold in the federal parliament, won by Deborah Grey in a 1989 by-election, Reform vaulted to fifty-two seats at the election of 1993. Reformers took almost 19 per cent of the popular vote—5 per cent more than the *Bloquistes*—but owing mainly to vote-splitting came up two seats shy of second place. They wanted to form the Official Opposition so badly they could taste it. “People aren’t concerned about Quebec to the degree they are concerned about taxes, their jobs, the economy, criminal justice and health care,” said Deborah Grey, whom Manning appointed deputy leader in 1993. “With Lucien Bouchard having abdicated the throne to go off referenduming, we will be in that [Official Opposition] position even more legitimately.”³⁹

As with the Bloc, the public face of Reform was the face of its leader. Born in Edmonton in 1947, Preston Manning had emerged fully formed on the federal scene in the 1980s as a homespun populist, fiscal conservative, and self-styled evangelical Christian. The son of Ernest Manning, “Bible Bill” Aberhart’s long-serving successor as premier of Alberta, Preston had a political pedigree so far to the right of Canada’s then-dominant left-liberal consensus that many Canadians thought him an extremist. In marked contrast to Lucien Bouchard, who had dabbled freely in Quebec politics, Manning had never detoured from the true-blue conservatism he inherited from his father. By the end of Canada’s centennial year, 1967, when many other Canadian twenty-five-year-olds were turning on, tuning in, and dropping out, Manning had already run as a Socred for a seat in parliament, co-authored a white paper for the Alberta government, and joined his first free-market think tank. He was, in the parlance of the day, a square. When Manning took his seat in the House of Commons for the first time in 1993, Reform was already known to Canadians as a party of “doctrinal rigidity.”⁴⁰ It was a label its MPs d

not dispute.

The Reform platform included massive cuts to government spending, particularly on welfare, an elected (Triple-E) Senate, major deficit and debt reduction, repeal of the Tories' hated GST, support for NAFTA, and a smattering of "socially conservative" policies including opposition to the extension of gay rights. Above all, Reformers demanded that "the West wants in"—into Ottawa, into the national conversation, into a political culture they perceived as favouring soft liberal centralizers in general and pampered Quebec nationalists in particular.

Preston Manning's position on the Constitution was categorical, then and later. If it were up to him he would offer Quebec a federalist alternative to the status quo by decentralizing Canada on a vast scale. Quebec nationalists would get most of the powers they wanted, but so would the rest of the provinces. "The status-quo federalists have lost the last three contests in Quebec," Manning said in late 1994. "We won't attack. We will just present our own positive view: that there is a better federalism than what we've got now and that there is public support for it outside Quebec."⁴¹ Stephen Harper, Manning's point man on the unity file and one of only four Reformers who in 1995 could speak French, would carry Reform's tough-love approach into Quebec during the referendum debate. The message never varied. "Canadians told us they want Canada to be a balanced and equal federation," Harper told Montrealers two weeks before the 1995 referendum vote. "There will be no special status, formally or informally for Quebec or any other province."⁴² Such pronouncements were guaranteed to alienate both Quebecers and the many English Canadians who sought some kind of accommodation with Quebec. Even old-style Alberta Tories like *Globe and Mail* editor-in-chief William Thorsell were put off by Reform's intractability. "The [Bloc Québécois] succeeded in 1995 because people like Mr. Manning prevailed," an exasperated Thorsell wrote in December 1994. "Mr. Manning will not be prime minister indeed."⁴³

Oddly enough, most Quebecers, Lucien Bouchard included, politely ignored the Reform Party. Their fight was not with Preston Manning. In the thousands of pages of newspaper copy generated by the referendum debate in Quebec, Reform was hardly ever mentioned. When either Preston Manning or Stephen Harper made public appearances in Quebec, which was not often, he was little more than a sideshow. Pascale Gemme, a Sherbrooke man who attended a small street protest when Manning visited his city in October 1995, spoke for many Quebecers. "In a way we could be happy that he's here," said Gemme sardonically of the Reform leader, "because he can help the *Oui!*"⁴⁴

Manning knew, of course, that for Quebecers he was beyond the pale. He later wrote this colourful description of his being *non grata*: "Have you ever been at a neighbourhood barbecue when a family feud breaks out and no one quite knows what to do? You are standing there in line to get your burger and drink, just minding your own business, when all of a sudden the Bouchards and the Chrétiens from down the street (they're related, you know) start going at it. Someone in the family wants a divorce and every member of the family is getting in on the act about whose fault it is and who did what to whom, including what Uncle Pierre did to Aunt Renée in 1982. The voices are getting louder and louder so nobody else can hear or say anything, and the chairman of the barbecue committee keeps saying 'Order, order,' but nobody's listening. In your heart you'd like to help, but you're not sure how and they don't want anyone to 'interfere,' so about all you can do is look busy fixing your burger and trying to stay out of it."⁴⁵

Consigned to the sidelines, looking busy and fixing their burgers, Manning and Harper would in 1995 play the only role available to them, as federalist *agents provocateurs*. They would press Jean Chrétien at every step of the referendum campaign to take a firm and unambiguous stand against the sovereignists, whether this meant challenging the constitutionality of unilateral secession, confronting legal arguments about the territorial integrity of Quebec, or determining whether 50 p

cent plus one vote was enough to decide the referendum, or contradicting sovereignist promises that Quebecers could continue to use Canadian passports and the Canadian dollar after separation. And the press they did, again and again, attacking what they saw as Chrétien's do-nothing strategy at every turn. In the House of Commons, where this battle played out almost daily, Chrétien did his best to block and weave. It frequently fell to his no-holds-barred deputy prime minister, Sheila Copps, to deplore government countermeasures. "[Calgary West MP Stephen Harper] is on very dangerous ground," fiery Copps told the House in December 1994, "when at a very crucial point in Canada's history his party and his leader and other members of his party are more intent on attacking the federal government than on attacking the separatists."⁴⁶

In January 1994, Preston Manning had his first private meeting with Jean Chrétien. The question of Quebec inevitably came up. Manning pitched the idea of "reforming federalism" but was stonewalled by the prime minister's "mantra" that the only option available after Meech was "routine federal-provincial negotiations." When Manning expressed the view that the government's lackluster platitudes were no match for Lucien Bouchard's "separatist dream," the prime minister simply shrugged.

"I left this meeting on cordial terms with Chrétien," said Manning, "but with the sinking feeling that he really had no forward-thinking strategy for combating separatism."⁴⁷

Appearing not to have a strategy is, of course, a strategy.

Since retiring from public life, Jean Chrétien has revealed that he was persuaded by his inner circle to stay in the weeds in the lead-up to the 1995 referendum vote. "Going into the campaign, my advisors had convinced me that I should limit my participation," he recalls, "even though a low-profile strategy ran against my political instincts and my competitive personality. I reluctantly went along."⁴⁸

Canadians know Jean Chrétien as a smart, savvy, and supremely self-confident individual. They know that he would heed the advice of men like Jean Pelletier, Eddie Goldenberg, and John Rae—over a two-year period and on a matter of grave national importance—only if he thought it was good advice. When Chrétien took power in October 1993, he was a thirty-year veteran of Canadian politics; he had held every major cabinet portfolio, he commanded a huge majority in the House of Commons, and he faced a weak and divided opposition. In almost every other policy area, he and his ministers could write their own tickets—as they later demonstrated by slaying the deficit and introducing sweeping reforms to social programs. "It is hard for most Canadians to remember how bleak our day looked at that point in our history," Chrétien has recalled. "To be frank, Canada was in terrible shape—exhausted, demoralized and fractured."⁴⁹ Canadians voted for Chrétien because they wanted him to act, and they gave him the mandate to do it.

But Quebec was different, much different. Chrétien had refused to campaign on the Constitution and Quebecers had punished him for it, voting overwhelmingly for *Bloquistes* and very nearly evicting him from his own seat in Saint-Maurice. Even after the election, the prime minister plainly did not want to appear obsessed with Quebec, as Pierre Trudeau and Brian Mulroney had been. The reason was obvious, and he did not need to hear it from his advisors: in the high-stakes contest for the hearts and minds of Quebecers, he wasn't holding many good cards.

The truth was that the prime minister was himself a liability. "Unlike Trudeau fifteen years earlier," Eddie Goldenberg recalls, "Chrétien in 1995 was not popular in Quebec. He had been demonized for years because of his role in the patriation of the Constitution and his position on the Meech Lake Accord. That demonization had come from all quarters."⁵⁰ It bears repeating that Chrétien was

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