

THE UNRAVELLING OF THE TIES THAT BIND

by Michael Adams and Mary Jane Lennon

Sir George-Etienne Cartier, a founding father of Canada, once described his nation as one with a "political nationality," that is, as one in which citizens are united not by language, religion or a common ethnicity, but by a set of constantly evolving political arrangements.

In fact, Canada as a national entity began essentially as a "marriage of convenience" between two peoples—the French and the English. Today, many are questioning whether this marriage can be saved, or whether as a nation we have begun the long painful walk to the divorce court. Are the economic and cultural forces currently threatening so many other countries around the world also causing an irreversible unravelling of the ties that once bound together this peaceable northern kingdom?

The Deepening Crisis

Certainly, an overall perusal of Environics' tracking data point to a weakening of the will to stay together as a nation, and suggest that many Canadians believe the current political leadership lacks the ability to lead the country toward a new and workable consensus. We are in the throes not only of a constitutional crisis but of a crisis of confidence.

The watershed event was the failure of the Mulroney government to secure ratification of the Meech Lake accord. This agreement, hammered out in 1987 by the prime minister and the ten provincial premiers, was designed to bring Quebec formally into the Constitution. (Quebec was the only province not to ratify the 1982 constitutional changes initiated by former prime minister Pierre Trudeau.) Without going into the details of the accord and the many points of controversy surrounding its contents, one may safely say that, in both English and French Canada, the document came to symbolize acceptance of Quebec as the "distinct society," with a certain "special status" among the ten provinces.

When the Newfoundland and Manitoba legislatures refused to endorse the agreement by the June 23 deadline, the rejection was largely perceived in Quebec as a denial of that province's linguistic and cultural aspirations. In English Canada, however, where there is strong resistance to any sort of "special status" arrangements for any province or group, the collapse of the accord was widely greeted as a rejection of "a bad deal" initiated by an incompetent government.

Throw Them All Out

The tactics used by Prime Minister Mulroney to force ratification of the accord during and immediately after his meeting with the provincial premiers in June were seen as ineffective, cynical, heavy-handed, and typical of a government that could not be trusted to lead the country out of its constitutional quagmire.

On the other hand, neither of the leaders of the two main opposition parties—the Liberals' Jean Chretien and New Democratic Party leader Audrey McLaughlin—seem poised to fill the leadership vacuum created by the crisis of confidence in Mulroney's Conservative government. Add to this mix the current high levels of concern over economic recession, and one sees a Canadian public which is disgruntled, disheartened, and disillusioned.

A Record He Didn't Want to Set

An Environics survey of 2,220 Canadians in February 1991 found that just 17% approved of the way Brian Mulroney was handling his job as prime minister. This level, which was the same as that reported November 1990, was a record low for the prime minister. The November approval rating was five points below that found in the July survey, which had been conducted in the midst of and immediately following the demise of the Meech Lake agreement and at a time of increasing concern over the economy. In other words, Brian Mulroney's popularity continued to fall throughout 1990. His low standing rivals that in the USSR for President Mikhail Gorbachev, and may be the lowest of any democratically elected leader in the world today.

A Leadership Vacuum

When Canadians were asked in the February survey which of the three party leaders would make the best prime minister, a plurality of 43% either said "none," named a fourth individual, or threw up their hands and said they had no opinion on the question. Twenty-five percent named New Democrat leader Audrey McLaughlin, 19% Liberal leader Jean Chretien, and 14% the incumbent PM Brian Mulroney. The political messiah for whom Canadians yearn is seemingly absent from the national stage.

Another national Environics' poll, conducted in February for *La Presse* newspaper of Montreal, found that, "if an election were held today," no party would come close to forming a majority government. Sixteen percent—up six points from a previous survey conducted in November 1990—were undecided or refused to state a preference. Among decided voters, the New Democrats and the Liberals tied for first place, the Conservatives placed a distant third, and approximately one-fifth of the electorate said

they would vote for regional or protest parties (primarily the rightist Reform Party and the separatist *Bloc Quebecois*). (Table 1)

Regional analysis reveals the potential for what, in the media, is increasingly referred to as the "balkanization" of Canadian politics. In Quebec (once the bastion of the Liberal party and, since 1984, the linchpin of Mulroney's Conservative majority) the *Bloc Quebecois* leads with the support of 36 percent of decided voters. The New Democrats enjoy a big lead over the other parties in Ontario and in British Columbia; and in Alberta, the Reform Party leads the others by a wide margin.

Is the Present Crisis Really Different?

Beyond this balkanization of the political landscape lies another more profound threat to the continued existence of a viable Canadian federation: a disturbing shift in the public's emotional response to the possibility of Quebec's declaring itself independent. During the 1980 Quebec referendum debate, English Canadians expressed a strong desire that the province remain part of Canada. Today, the mood is quite different. English Canada, by and large, seems ambivalent about Quebec's possible departure. More than ever before, there's a sense that if Quebecers want to leave, the rest of the country should let them go.

Environics has been tracking these feelings through a question which asks Canadians whether they would be

happy, sad, or indifferent if Quebec decided to separate. The survey from February of this year found Quebecers almost evenly divided between those who say they would be sad and those who would welcome independence. Few were indifferent. These findings have changed little since April 1990, although Quebec opinion, particularly between January and April of 1990, showed an erosion of attachment to the rest of the nation. During that period, the proportion of Quebecers who said they would be happy to see Quebec separate increased by 6 points.

Canadians elsewhere were significantly less likely than Quebecers to say they would be happy if Quebec left the Canadian federation. The pattern of response has changed little since the question was first asked in January 1990. However, only in Ontario did a majority say they would feel sad if Quebec's departed. In the other provinces, pluralities indicated regret at the prospect of Quebec independence, but large proportions—over 30%—expressed indifference.

The Evolution to Devolution

It's clear from trend data that English Canadians, like their Quebec compatriots, want a restructuring of the federation and, in many areas, a devolution of jurisdictional powers from the federal to the provincial level. Earlier this spring, Quebec's ruling Liberal party released a constitutional proposal, known as the Allaire Report, which called for Quebec to have full sovereignty in 22 areas of jurisdiction, many of which are currently shared

Table 1

**Federal Party Support Among Decided Voters
February 1991**

	Total	Atlantic Prov.	Quebec	Ontario	West
New Democratic Party	30%	35%	14%	42%	29%
Liberal Party	29	32	30	31	23
Progressive Conservative Party	19	27	18	16	21
Reform Party	11	5	1	9	26
Bloc Quebecois	9	—	36	—	—
Other Party	1	—	1	2	1

Source: Survey by Environics Research Group for *La Presse*, February 1991.

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with Ottawa or are under exclusive federal control. When asked, in the *La Presse* poll, whether they agreed with the proposal, 59% of Quebecers, compared to 24% of other Canadians, replied in the affirmative. However, the views of English Canada shifted dramatically when respondents were asked if they would agree to "a constitutional proposal that would give all provinces, including your own, the same increased powers that Quebec has asked for"—a substantial majority of 57% of Canadians outside Quebec said they would agree with this second proposal; just 36% disagreed (Figure 1).

These results suggest that while English Canadians are unwilling to grant Quebec "special status" or special powers within the Canadian federation, they are quite ready to consider proposals that would devolve constitutional powers to *all* provinces, recognizing the equality of each.

Majority support for an equal devolution of powers exists right across English Canada. However, it's important to note that 25% strongly disagreed with this proposal.

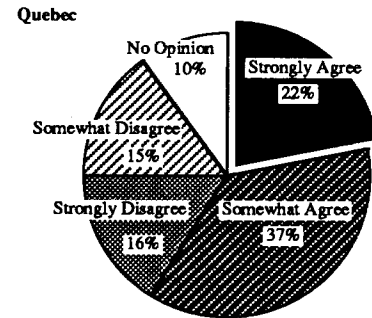
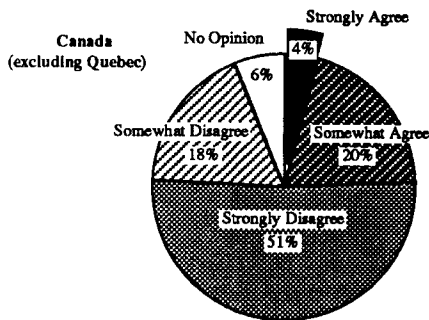
In other words, English Canada is sharply split between those who favor the devolution of powers from the federal government to all provinces, and those who prefer the status quo.

There is considerable public sympathy for a more decentralized federalism of the sort that Prime Minister Mulroney's government now seems to be considering. As American pollster Larry Kaagan observed at an Environics conference on social change in September 1990, Canada has much in common with the Soviet Union. Both countries are laboring under the strains of strong centrifugal forces, and both are headed by an embattled political leadership that has no choice but to respond to these demands for empowerment. In both, the ultimate solution—if such a thing exists—will lie in satisfying the demands for greater regional and cultural autonomy without completely emasculating the central government.

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Figure 1

More Powers to the Quebec Government*

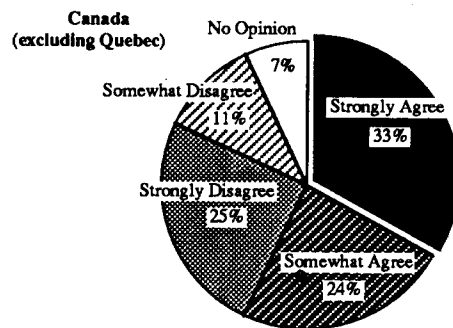


Questions: As you may know, under the Canadian federal system, the federal government has certain powers such as defense and currency and the provinces have certain powers such as education and health. Some other powers are shared between the two levels.

*Recently, the Quebec Liberal party made a constitutional proposal, called the Allaire Report, that would greatly increase the powers of the Quebec government and reduce the powers of the federal government, but would leave Quebec in Canada. Would you say that you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with this proposal?

**Would you say that you strongly agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with a constitutional proposal that would give all the provinces, including your own, the same increased powers that Quebec has asked for?

More Powers to all the Provinces**



Source: Survey by Environics Research Group for *La Presse*, February 1990.