

Quebecers—Hedging Their Bets

By Michael Adams and Mary Jane Lennon

Will Québec stay? Will it leave? Will either of these questions be answered definitively in the foreseeable future? Well, to begin with the last question first, the answer is “probably not.” In the “post-modern age of contingency” in which we exist, it has become standard procedure to hedge one’s bets. Mainstream thinking is shaped by a rejection of secular and religious ideologies in favor of “the unending calculus of contingency.”

Quebecers are constantly balancing the inevitable trade-offs. They are pitting a tribal fear of annihilation—typically disguised as the chauvinism of self-affirmation—against the potential consequences, primarily the material costs, of national sovereignty.

Weakening Attachments and Divided Loyalties

In Québec, the Judeo-Christian moral code has been replaced by secular humanism, and Catholic orthodoxy by material hedonism. Few are willing to defer gratification to the next life. The result of this revolution in social values is the decline of traditional loyalties. Quebecers—like other Canadians—have rejected automatic deference to the authority of the church, the state, and the monopolies and oligopolies that used to provide comfort and order in the marketplace and in society.

Traditionally, Canadian political life has presumed an unspoken contract between a populace that defers to its elites, and these elites who, in their turn, can be counted on to deliver various benefits—from old age pensions, unemployment insurance and health care to the entire edifice of the social welfare state. But over the past two decades, international forces in economics and communications have served to unravel the ties that once bound Canadians together. Trade, travel and culture flow north-south, not east-west as envisioned by the Fathers of Confederation in 1867. Centrifugal forces have undermined the capac-

ity of the elites to deliver the “treats” and have transformed the values that motivate Canadians.

Social research that Environics Research Group has undertaken over the past decade and a half reveals a fairly rapid evolution of values. There has been a movement away from widespread conformity to traditional social mores, such as order, authority and discipline, to the development of the more “personalized” values of spontaneity, informality, and self-expression, where the questioning of such traditional authorities as the church, the state, doctors, teachers, judges and lawyers is perfectly appropriate.

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At the same time, there has been a movement from asceticism and deferred gratification to hedonism and demands for immediate gratification. In addition, the research traces an evolution from a culture in which individuals were outer-directed, to one in which people are inner-directed—more secure in their personal values and more attuned to what feels right for them.

On the spiritual front, we have witnessed what amounts to the democratization of God. God is no longer some omniscient and omnipotent supernatural being. In medieval times, only kings and cardinals were expected to live like gods. In the early democratic era, the aristocrats were joined by white property-owning males. But, in the post-modern age, there is a consensus that all are eligible, including those formerly relegated to the periphery. No more fear, no more guilt.

To return to the subject at hand, the future of Québec and of Canada as we know

it: Our reading of the social landscape of “the distinct society” leads us to say that, while Quebecers will never really leave, they will never really settle in compatibly. Despite their political support for separatist parties at both the federal level (the Bloc Québécois) and the provincial level (the Parti Québécois), recent data show they are taking a hard second look at the consequences of separatist policies.

Polling conducted by Environics in Québec over the past 20 years shows that most French Quebecers have dual identities—and therefore divided loyalties—when it comes to Canada and Québec. When asked whether they feel more a citizen of Canada or of Québec, a majority of Quebecers say they feel more like citizens of Québec. However, provincial allegiance, which increased sharply throughout the 1980s, has declined somewhat since 1991.

It should also be noted that such forced choices tend to mask the duality of Quebecers’ emotions. At the same time that they are saying they are “Quebecers first,” almost eight in ten say they are “proud to be Canadians.” These feelings of pride are much less fervent than those expressed in the rest of Canada, and they have declined over the last decade, but very few Quebecers voice a lack of pride in Canada and virtually no one is indifferent.

Polls also find French Quebecers voicing a weaker affective orientation than that found in the rest of Canada toward such Canadian institutions and symbols as the flag, the national anthem, our national parks and historic sites, and the RCMP (the Mounties). At the same time, not surprisingly, polls find that attachment to bilingualism is much stronger in Québec than in the rest of Canada (see page 10).

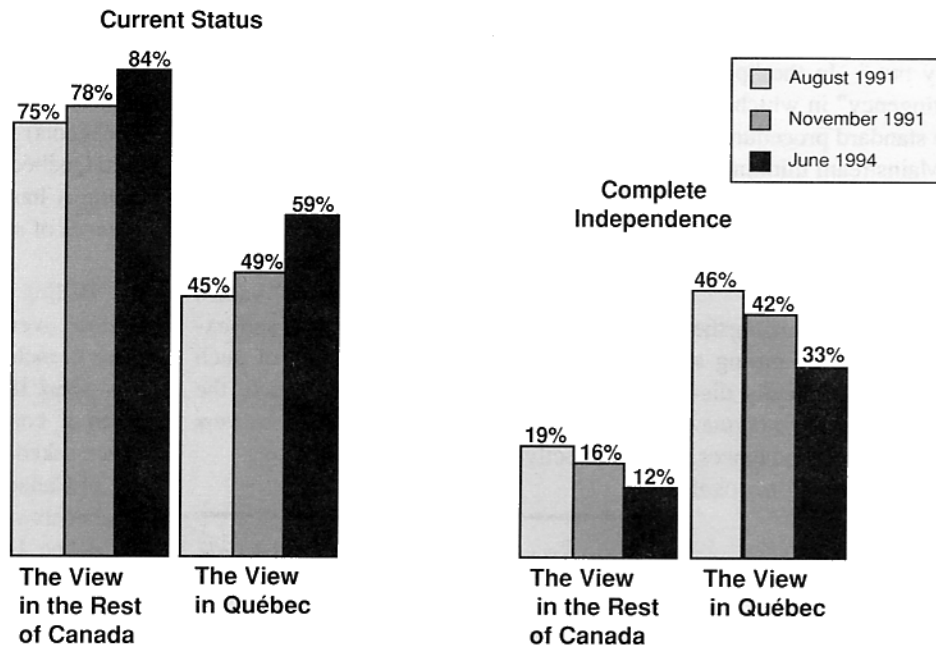
A Unique Nationality

The collective ideals and common values Canadians share are largely defined by a sense of detachment from the secular,

Thinking About Québec Independence:

Maintaining the Province's Current Status Gains Ground

Question: Given the choice between Québec's current status in Canada and complete independence from Canada, which would you choose?

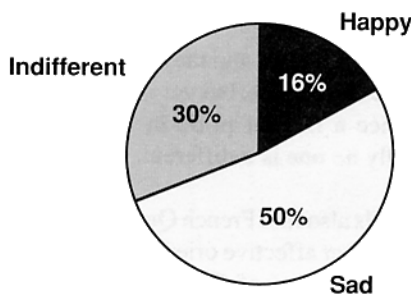


How Would You Feel If Québec Separated From Canada?

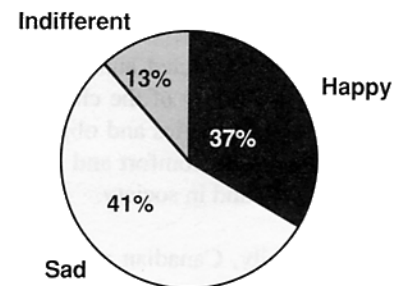
The View in the Rest of Canada

"Sad" Gains Everywhere

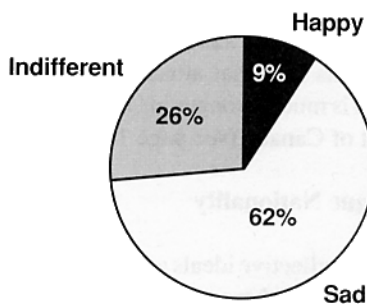
The View in Québec



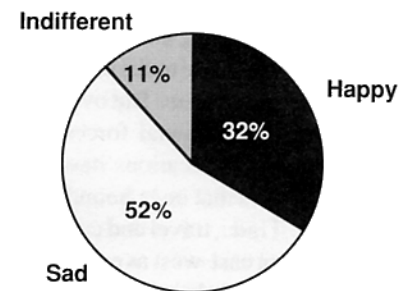
1991



Question: What would be your reaction if Québec decided to separate from the rest of Canada? Would you...be happy to see Québec leave...be sad to see Québec leave...or would you be indifferent?



1994



Source: Surveys by Environics Research Group Limited, latest that of June 9-July 4, 1994.

religious and tribal ideologies that people view as the cause of so much conflict in the rest of the world. Canadian nationalism—if you can call it that—is a reflection of the fact that Canadians have multiple identities. No one identity is so dominant as to preclude the importance of all others, depending on the pragmatics of the situation. The Canadian state was, and remains, a “political nationality”—a bargain between former British colonies which reluctantly chose to form a federation with each other over other options, principally absorption into the United States.

For much of Canada’s history, English Canadians dominated their French-speaking compatriots, even in the province of Québec. The assertion of Québec nationalism in the 1960s paralleled the emergence of other mid-century liberation movements (African-Americans, women, youth) that set out to redress historical grievances and pursue equality with formerly dominant groups. Over the past quarter-century, the goals of French Canadians, particularly those resident in Québec, have been largely accomplished—to the point where current political objectives are becoming more symbolic than substantive.

Accommodation

Recent polls, for instance, reveal relatively few concrete grievances over areas of government jurisdiction. Environics asked Quebecers what governmental arrangements for 19 areas they preferred, those which were: exclusively provincial, mainly provincial, mainly federal, exclusively federal or joint jurisdiction. In no area did a majority express the desire for exclusive provincial control; the most support for exclusive provincial jurisdiction was in the field of regional economic development. There was also significant support for exclusive provincial jurisdiction over education. However, pluralities favored joint federal-provincial jurisdiction over the politically sensitive areas of arts and culture and of health. Fewer than one in ten wanted exclusive provincial jurisdiction in the area of foreign relations.

Traditionally, one area of tension has been that of language policy. However, this

sore point has been largely resolved over the past 25 years by legislation designed to protect and promote the French language. French is the official language of business in Québec; it is the official language of instruction in the schools (except for those students whose parents themselves attended English language schools) and outdoor signs give prominence to the French language. In fact, Québec may well be the only jurisdiction in the world where the “Stop” signs say, “Arrêt!”

Constitutional Wrangling

Unfortunately, Québec’s own steps to protect the French language and culture, and parallel efforts by the federal govern-

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ment to make Canada officially bilingual, have not been enough to make French Quebecers feel comfortable within Canada. Their frustrations have been mirrored in, and exacerbated by, the failure of federal and provincial governments to create the sort of constitutional accord that would make Quebecers feel truly “at home” in the Canadian Confederation.

In 1981, when former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau took the final steps to “patriate” the country’s constitution from Britain, Québec’s then Parti Québécois government—alone among the provinces—refused to sign, as did the Québec Liberals when they regained office in 1985. Two subsequent efforts to bring Québec into the constitution were also unsuccessful.

In 1990, the Meech Lake constitutional accord died when it failed to achieve the required unanimous consent of the provincial legislatures. It had focused on the demands of Québec and the recognition of

the province as a “distinct society.” In 1992, the Charlottetown accord went down to defeat in a national referendum, rejected by a majority of Canadian voters, including a majority of Quebecers. It had attempted to decentralize powers from the federal government to all the provinces while recognizing Québec’s special status in the federation.

The election of the separatist Parti Québécois in September 1994 has once again brought constitutional issues to the front burner of Canadian politics, largely because of the promise of newly elected premier Jacques Parizeau to hold a referendum on sovereignty by the end of 1995. However, the election results should be seen primarily as the defeat of an unpopular government—not as a call for independence.

The new government’s narrow victory in the popular vote (44.7% for the PQ to 44.3% for the incumbent Liberals) illustrates the divisions in Québec society and the extreme ambivalence of many French Quebecers. After all, a quarter of all voters cast their ballots for the avowedly sovereigntist PQ while still maintaining their personal opposition to the goal of sovereignty. This stance may confuse the Manichean Anglo-Saxon mind, but makes perfect sense to a minority with divided loyalties having always to balance emotion and common sense.

The PQ lost its first referendum on sovereignty in 1980 by a margin of 60% to 40%, and there is no doubt that today it faces an uphill battle in its efforts to translate a popular vote of 44.7% in the election into a victory in a referendum on sovereignty. What’s more, it will be doing so in a context in which Quebecers are expressing declining support for sovereignty and an increasing sense that their province belongs in Canada.

At the same time, federalist forces must recognize that, over the course of the past 14 years, the context in which they must operate has also changed. Unlike their predecessors in 1980, the present federal government is constrained in what it can do for Québec. Huge annual deficits and an accumulated public sector debt nearly equal

What's Québec's Future?

It Should Be Part of Canada

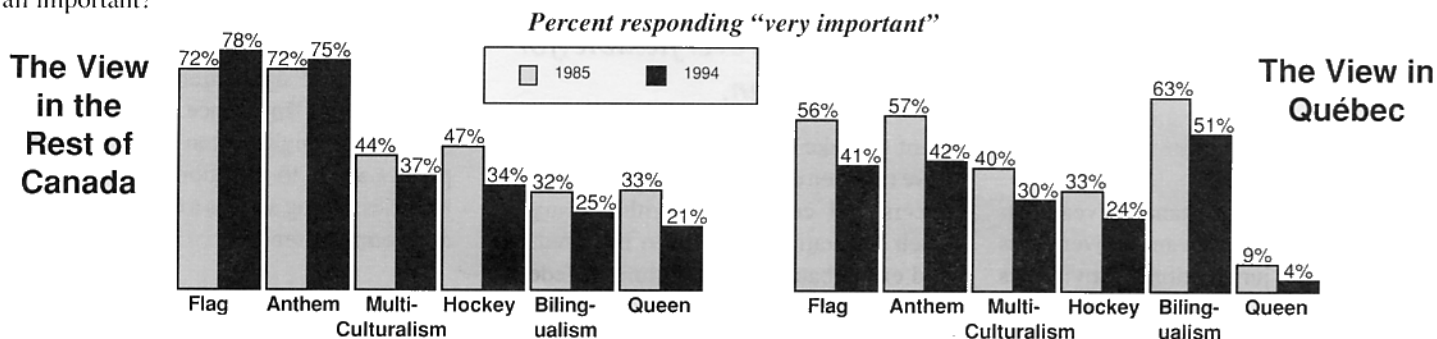
Question: Do you think that Québec should be part of Canada or should not be part of Canada?

Percent responding "should be part of Canada"

The view in:	1977	1991	1994
All of Canada	85%	72%	78%
Québec	78	56	60
Rest of Canada	87	77	85

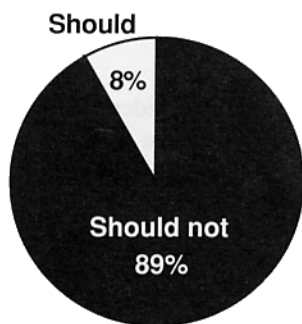
At the Same Time, Most Symbols of Canadian Identity Are Weaker in Québec

Question: How important are the following to the Canadian identity: very important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important?



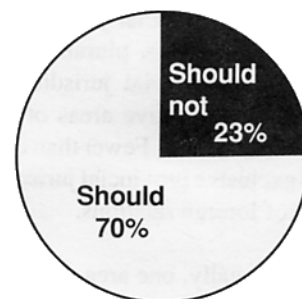
Sharp Differences on Whether Québec Should Be Given More Powers

The View in the Rest of Canada



Question: If a new Québec government goes ahead with a referendum on Québec independence, do you think the federal government should or should not...give Québec more powers or areas of jurisdiction if that is what it takes to keep Québec in Canada...?

The View in Québec



Source: Surveys by Environics Research Group Limited, latest that of June 9-July 4, 1994.

to the nation's gross domestic product all but preclude additional financial incentives to Québec.

Moreover, the federal government's commitment to reducing the annual federal deficit to three percent of GDP—from roughly \$40 billion to \$25 billion—will result in a politically painful reduction of federal transfers to provinces and individuals. Quebecers who benefit disproportionately from federal largesse will be the first and loudest to complain when the rubber of fiscal reform hits the road. Equally important is the growing resistance to further substantive or symbolic concessions to Québec on the part of Canadians in other provinces. To them, Québec is already seen as getting too much.

It is possible, then, that emotions could return to the fever pitch seen immediately after the failure of the Meech Lake constitutional accord in 1990. Quebecers felt rejected and humiliated, and Environics' polling showed voters in that province evenly divided between sovereignty and the status quo. The goal of sovereignty came to represent self-respect for individual French Quebecers.

In spite of these tribal emotions, it would take an unusual set of circumstances to force the majority of Quebecers to opt for the degree of independence espoused by Jacques Parizeau and his federal counter-

part, Lucien Bouchard, the leader of the official opposition Bloc Québécois in Ottawa. Economic considerations alone could tilt the balance in favor of the federalist forces. A plurality of 49% of Quebecers fear that the economy of their province would be harmed if Québec were to become an independent country—the highest proportion since tracking on the question began in 1990.

Fifty-two percent of Quebecers say they would be sad to see their province leave Canada; this proportion is 11 points higher than those reported in April 1990 and in 1991. Delight at the prospect of Québec being on its own, which increased steadily throughout 1990 and 1991, has now declined.

Like all Canadian minorities, Quebecers are both tribal and post-modern. Their motivation to defend their language or assert themselves politically is balanced by a pragmatic need and desire to maintain their current posture of material hedonism. They will continue to balance the communal and the individual and, in effect, attempt to "have it all."

The quest for finality in a vote "to stay in" or "to get out" will be frustrated by "the unending calculus of contingency" that characterizes both Quebecers and their English-speaking counterparts. Part of this calculus is to maintain the Canadian sense

of distance from all social institutions, including the existing confederation of Canada and the putative nation-state of Québec. The goal is to balance these two political forces so as to maximize the self-interest of material reward and the quest for emotional connectedness.

In the past, Canada rejected the rule of market forces in favor of the benevolent state. That is a luxury we can no longer afford. We're all getting a crash course in Economics 101. Even Canada's social democrats—at least those unfortunate enough to be elected to govern—have bowed to the discipline imposed by massive government deficits and growing public sector debt. These lessons have not been lost on Quebecers.

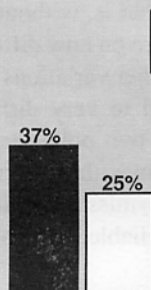
Staying in Canada may be a bit uncomfortable, but for all except a small minority, the prospect of leaving is much worse. Ours is a population that is resigned to—and may even take some pride in—the relatively weak attachments that bind us to each other. We will continue on much as we have: forever pragmatic, forever flexible, forever Canadian.

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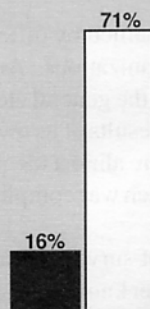
Canada and the US: Good Neighbors, But Sometimes Different Outlooks

Question: Do you agree or disagree with the following?
[Percent saying "strongly agree"]

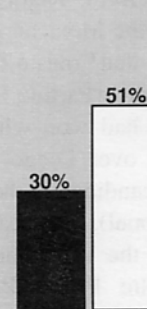
"The government has a responsibility to take care of the poor."



"I feel that I have the personal freedom to say anything about the government."



"My religious faith is very important to me in my day-to-day life."



Source: Angus E. Reid and Margaret M. Burns, *Canada and the World* [privately printed, 1992], based on survey research under the direction of the Angus Reid Group.