

# Dear premiers ...

## It's time to oppose — not appease — separatism

*Canada's provincial premiers meet tomorrow and Monday in Calgary in an effort to build a framework for renewed discussions on national unity. In an open letter, University of Calgary political science professor Tom Flanagan and Stephen Harper, vice-president of the National Citizens' Coalition, invite the premiers to oppose, rather than appease, separatist sentiment in Quebec.*

**B**eginning Sunday, you will meet for two days in Calgary to discuss national unity. Rather than incrementally resurrecting the Meech-Charlotte-town agenda, you might consider the perspective of the loyal Canadians who have wisely and repeatedly rejected that option.

Contrary to what the Business Council on National Issues says, it's vital not to start drafting legislative resolutions to recognize Quebec as "distinct" or "unique" or anything else. No new declarations are needed. Quebec is an integral part of Canada and Canada's treatment of Quebec has been generous without comparison.

Quebec's civil code has been recognized from the outset. The French language and culture in Quebec are stronger today than ever.

Declarations about Quebec's uniqueness, no matter how well intentioned, simply create the impression that Canada's recognition of Quebec has been inadequate and that Quebec is somehow threatened by being part of Canada. In fact, the reverse is true. Canada has nothing to apologize for.

In any case, the "uniqueness of Quebec" is code for distinct society, and "distinct society" is code for special status. The "soft nationalists" in Quebec will not be bought off with vague words of goodwill. It is fashionable to say that we can recognize the distinct society or the uniqueness of Quebec without giving it more power, but that's not what the Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) thinks. As recently as Aug. 21, Daniel Johnson proclaimed that distinct society must be nothing short of "a new legal framework for Quebec." That means power — and a lot

more — and you all should know it by now.

The argument for such pathetic declarations is that they will help Johnson and the PLQ win the next Quebec election. No one seems to ask why Johnson cannot help himself.

At least we know what Lucien Bouchard is trying to do, but what is Johnson's game? Much evidence suggests that the PLQ is still committed to the strategy that it has executed so successfully for three decades — brandishing the threats of secession made by the separatists in order to extract concessions beneficial to Quebec nationalism. That's exactly what Johnson did in the 1995 referendum campaign. In the end he succeeded in getting Prime Minister Jean Chretien to pass a distinct-society resolution in the House of Commons to create a constitutional veto for Quebec by means of legislation and to give Quebec responsibili-

ty and money for manpower training. Incidentally, Johnson almost lost the referendum playing this game.

The truth is that periods of government by the PLQ have been as destabilizing as PQ government. There have been endless invocations of the separatist threat, vague and open-ended constitutional demands, restrictive language policies and plans for a referendum on sovereignty. Even today, Johnson — besides advocating an omnipotent distinct society clause — still refuses to sign the Constitution, insists on Quebec's right to sovereign self-determination, and resists federal efforts to make any referendum process abide by Canadian law and the Constitution.

For years, we have been told to accept this kind of conditional federalism because Canada is weak. Without Quebec, we are informed, the economy will collapse, the other provinces will split and millions of loyal Quebecers will be stranded.

Such appeasers have meekly conceded that separatists can alone determine the sovereignty process and set the political agenda. They have feared to prepare the country for separation and then fretted about the catastrophes that will befall Canada if Quebec nationalists do not get their way.

Most loyal Canadians, however, know

that Canada is strong, not weak. Quebec's economy depends on Canada, not the other way around. The Quebecois have been given a fair, often dominant role in the governing of the country.

Canada is a democratic, constitutional and internationally recognized and respected state. Loyal Canadians are committed to keeping their country united, strong and free whether or not Quebec's ethnic nationalists illegally attempt to form a rump republic.

What really are the choices that face the Parti Quebecois if it is re-elected? They are three:

1. They can conclude that Quebec separation simply does not have the support to carry a referendum. They will decide not to hold one, engaging in an historic and humiliating retreat.

2. They can hold a referendum and lose. This will be an unqualified defeat since support for sovereignty will have fallen from its 1995 level.

3. They can hold a referendum and win by a slim majority. They will then enter negotiations with Canada in a divided and weak position. Or they will declare unilateral independence; and, if Canada is well prepared, the ethnic state will briefly exist as an unrecognized, truncated entity with its economy and its public support rapidly collapsing.

What, then, can the premiers do at this juncture? A lot, if you realize that it is now the time to oppose, rather than appease, separatism. The federal government has been slowly drifting to an unprecedentedly firm line — emphasizing the rule of law, demanding to approve any referendum question, refusing to recognize a simple majority vote in a referendum, and threatening to partition Quebec if all else fails. Some of these positions are not fully developed or thought out, but at least they show a determination to act from a position of strength.

The expectations of Canadians have also changed. Loyal Canadians from across the country will be directly involved in the next referendum, notwithstanding Quebec's referendum laws. They will send a strong message that this is a Canadian, not a Quebecois issue. As a consequence neither Chretien nor his successor will dare repeat the mistake of letting Johnson and the PLQ run the show. The premiers need to orient themselves in this new environment. They need to discuss the implications of Canadians' new assertiveness and Ottawa's new position.

Do they agree with all of it, or part of it, or none of it? How would they respond to a Yes vote in a referendum? Have they got a contingency plan? Are their provinces and their economies ready to deal from a position of strength? There's more than enough here for two days of real discussion.



A new legal framework for Quebec would help Daniel Johnson and the Quebec Liberal Party win the next Quebec election. No one seems to ask why Johnson cannot help himself.