

Leaders missing meaning of vote

PRESTON MANNING and Jean Chretien recently fought a much publicized duel in the House of Commons.

The Reform leader maintained that in the Oct. 30 Quebec referendum 50% plus one of the vote must be considered a decisive majority, Yes or No. The PM said he would not break up the country because of a single vote, but he would not say how large a majority he would consider decisive. Both leaders had a point; but neither broached the real issue.

The pressing question is whether a Yes vote will be interpreted as legitimizing a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI). That is how the question is being put to the voters in Quebec; but, in spite of a crystal-clear ruling from the Superior Court of Quebec that UDI is illegal, no one in the federal government is insisting the Constitution must be upheld.

Manning is right that a Yes vote, even by a narrow margin, must be respected; but we must be clear about what that means. It does not mean Quebec has a right to declare its sovereignty. It is only a political statement to trigger discussion of separation with Ottawa and other provinces.

The Constitution does not specifically provide for departure of provinces, nor does it mention most of the things that can be done by constitutional amendment. By following the correct procedures, we

can change our Constitution in any way we choose. Just as Canada has added provinces under the Constitution, it can subtract provinces. What is required is a constitutional amendment under the so-called "general procedure" (approval by Parliament plus the legislatures of seven provinces having 50% of the population of the provinces). The province in question must be one of the seven; Quebec cannot be expelled against its will.

If there is a Yes vote, the prime minister should announce he will initiate the constitutional amendment process to see if agreement on the terms and conditions of separation can be reached; and Ottawa and the provinces can counter with their demands.

If an agreement can be negotiated, it will then have to be debated and approved in Parliament and the provincial legislatures. I predict the people of Quebec will never allow their politicians to approve such a deal, once they see what separation entails.

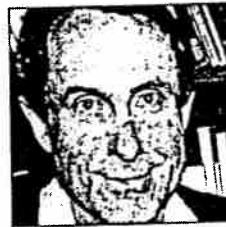
But it is essential to insist the Constitution be upheld. Following the amendment procedure is the only chance those of us living outside Quebec have to see that our vital interests are protected.

If Quebec is allowed to proceed with UDI, the game will be over. UDI would create immediate chaos in international money markets, and Canada would quickly be forced to make a deal — almost any deal — to salvage what remained of the dollar.

One would hope UDI can be prevented politically, but the use of force cannot be ruled out.

Some will argue we should not say this now because it is provocative, and the No side is likely to win anyway. But we will get cold comfort from a narrow victory by the No forces. The separatists will have momentum, and the question will soon be back. It is time to say what should have been said 30 years ago when the separatist movement began.

I am not opposed to the separation of Quebec if that is what a majority of its people want. But secession must take place under the amending procedures of our Constitution. To insist on the rule of law is the best protection of our interests and the best way to ensure separation never takes place.



Tom

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Guest Column