

Editorial

ON 30 NOVEMBER 1998 Quebeckers were asked to elect their representatives to the National Assembly and thereby select their government. The two main parties had good reason to be hopeful of winning the favours of the electorate. The Official Opposition—the Québec Liberal Party—was led by a young, charismatic leader. In most parts of the country, Jean Charest was seen as the man who could save Canada from the threat posed by separatist forces. Brought from Ottawa for this sole purpose, Charest seemed eager to cross swords with his former Cabinet colleague, Lucien Bouchard. Although Charest came to Québec with some knowledge of key provincial issues, his knowledge was biased by his federal reading of the problems; he had spent most of his political career based in Ottawa and was in the habit of looking at things through the Ottawa end of the lens. During his first months in office he had to fashion a plan for his new party. His lack of experience in the provincial arena caused him to keep a low profile, which the public perceived as a lack of commitment. As a result, the tremendous support he had enjoyed in April, when he was “crowned” liberal leader, eroded week after week. The monthly Léger & Léger polls indicated that after Charest announced his candidacy in March 1998, support for the Liberal party rose to 53 per cent from 41 per cent two months earlier,¹ but the figures were back to 41 per cent on the eve of the election.²

The lack of steadiness in his opponent’s momentum gave Lucien Bouchard, the Parti Québécois leader, reason to hope. By playing the “we had no choice” card, Bouchard defended the hardcore spending-cuts policies of his government and conveyed a message of hope for better days. His campaign slogan, *J’ai*

¹ *Intentions de votes du provincial; de janvier 1995 à aujourd’hui*. Léger et Léger, consulted at <http://www.leger-leger.qc.ca>.

² *Cueillette du 23 au 26 novembre 1998 paru le 28 novembre*. Léger et Léger, consulted at <http://www.leger-leger.qc.ca>.

confidence, meaning “I am confident” as well as “I trust,” reflected this hope. However, in most parts of Canada the signal sounded more like an alarm bell: would we be back to the days of dispute on the eve of the breaking up of the country? Even though third-party endorsement was made easier by a recent Supreme Court ruling, too many messages from concerned Canadians could have been counterproductive. Messages of this type sent during the 1980 and 1995 referendum campaigns were not followed by satisfying results for many Quebecers who considered giving Canada “a last chance.” Such a strategy would have brought back memories of deceit. Thus people who had no say in the election but felt they could be affected by the results, did not intervene, even though they had shown a keen interest in the outcome of the campaign. It is in this spirit that the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie University organized a series of public lectures under the title, “Québec Votes: The National Impact.” Over 120 people attended, and the event was covered by both the electronic and print media. Several people expressed their interest in getting copies of the papers presented, and it is, in part, to answer this demand that they are published here.

The first presentation, on 13 November by Dr. Louis Massicotte, provided an overview of the issues at stake. Ten days later, Michel Vastel gave an analysis of the potential outcomes of the campaign. Finally, on 3 December, less than 72 hours after the results were known, I analyzed the numbers, looking at initial tendencies that seemed to appear. Dr. Jennifer Smith examined the social union debate that allowed Bouchard’s team to get some support from the “soft nationalist” electorate, due to the opening the Premier expressed towards this specific form of renewed federalism.

These four presentations form the first part of this special issue of *The Dalhousie Review*. The analyses were made in the heat of the campaign and during its immediate aftermath. As such, they were based on the information available at the time and without knowledge of elements made public afterwards. (There is one exception. Since the social union debate is a question that evolved quickly after the election, it seems natural that more recent developments should be included here.) The decision to publish articles based on public lectures given on particular dates was taken be-

cause I wanted to provide an overview of how the campaign was analyzed *as it evolved*; this, in itself, may provide some understanding of the process of such an analysis: which elements were forgotten and why? were the results simply unpredictable or did we underestimate some important aspects of the campaign?

To round out the issues in question, particularly for non-Quebeckers, three other articles are included. These research papers were presented by academics outside of Québec at recent major scientific forums.³ The first paper outlines the importance of collective identification. Conducted in the tradition of Almond and Verba's groundbreaking study, Krisan Evenson's paper analyzes the political socialization influence on the persistence of the *société distincte* perception and its affirmation in Québec. These two words, *société* and *distincte*, were a key factor in the failure of the Meech Lake Accord and in the subsequent rise of alienation and independentist sentiments in Québec, as well as of an alienation sentiment towards Québec in the rest of Canada. As Jean Charest's key obstacle to power was the perception that he was less able than Bouchard to defend Québec's identity, it is interesting to understand why and how many people in Québec consider themselves so different—and what Quebeckers mean when they refer to *société distincte*.

Where Evenson looks at collective identification, Scott Piroth examines how individual values may affect support for sovereignty. Based on a thorough knowledge of the key studies in this area, Piroth's research brings to light elements that could motivate an individual's support for a specific option or party. He considers factors such as religious, moral, left/right, liberal/socialist, and post-materialist values, as well as some socio-demographic data.

Finally, Tracy Summerville looks into the failure of the Charlottetown Accord in the 1992 pan-Canadian referendum. Much has been said and written about this segment of Canada's political history. However, Summerville's findings raise questions that could well be applied to other recent voting patterns in Québec. Summerville succeeds in bringing to light important factors related to the intrinsic links between individual and organizational identity, a phenomenon she refers to as the "social explanandum."

³ Canadian Political Science Association (Ottawa, June 1998) and American Political Science Association (Boston, MA, Sept. 1998) annual meetings.

The issue concludes with a number of book reviews, which were chosen with a view to understanding contemporary Québec politics. So many questions are asked about Québec that it is impossible to cover them all. However, a general election provides an interesting opportunity to examine how a society perceives itself and, as André Bernard wrote, “a vote is more than a choice between different options. It is indeed the expression of a commitment towards and the belonging to a society.”⁴ Therefore, one might say this general election is like an open window through which you are invited to peek into Québec’s political landscape. And since in the wake of the 1995 referendum on sovereignty, key issues were at stake, it is difficult to consider this an ordinary election.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to those people who made this publication possible. The interest and support provided by Dr. David Cameron, Chairperson of the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie, was invaluable: he took the suggestion of a single presentation on the election results and turned it into a series of public lectures. Thanks also to those who generously answered Dr. Cameron’s request for financial support: the President of Dalhousie University, the Dean of the Arts and Social Sciences, and the Dean of Graduate Studies. Dr. Louise Carbert from the Department of Political Science also deserves thanks. The logistics of such an event could well have turned into a nightmare; this was not the case, due in a large part to the continuous support of a dedicated person in the department, Ms. Paulette Chiasson. Without the involvement of Ms. Christine Smith and Dalhousie’s Public Relations Office, this series of lectures would never have received the attention it did. Finally, many thanks are due to Dr. Denis Stairs, who supported the publication of this project, and Dr. Ronald Huebert, editor of the *Dalhousie Review*, who agreed to open its pages to help us better understand some of the contributing factors that shape Canada’s political life.

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⁴André Bernard, *La Vie politique au Québec et au Canada* (Sillery: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 1997) 3. (My translation of: “Le vote est davantage qu’un choix entre diverses options. Il est en effet un geste qui manifeste l’adhésion à la société.”)