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PREFACE

It was the best of times, it was the worst
of times.

— Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

1967: The Last Good Year

— Pierre Berton (1997)

On the evening of October 30, 1995, Canadians sat glued to their television sets in dismay as early results from the Quebec referendum showed supporters for separation from Canada winning by a narrow margin. By 10:00 p.m. (Eastern), the tide had turned, and, by a margin of less than one percent, or 50,000 votes, the separatist option had been defeated.

It is not certain, however, how much longer Canadians committed to confederation will be able to keep Quebec in the country. Because previous provincial or regional secession movements usually lacked momentum or widespread popular support, Canadians have neglected to develop the skills, knowledge, or experience to deal with threats to the integrity of Canada's territory.

In fact, as recently as fifty years ago, few Canadians (except, perhaps, for academics or other such privileged few) thought

much about Canadian identity, separatism, or national sovereignty. Much more typical were people like my parents, post-World War II immigrants from Holland, who, along with hundreds of thousands of other young couples, whether newcomers like themselves or Canadian-born, saw Canada with its natural wealth, freedom, and opportunities as a safe and secure place to live, work, and raise families. From their perspective, it also did no harm that they lived next door to the United States of America, the “free” world’s richest, most powerful country, its bulwark against Soviet communism. Canada’s baby boom of the 1950s and early 1960s, the largest in the postwar west, reflected their optimism.

By and large, Canada delivered for them. My parents, for example, even while struggling to make ends meet, almost immediately bought a house and a car, and over the next twenty-five years paid for their children’s private-school education, went on vacations, supported my grandparents, and so forth. They are now retired, pensioned and living off investments, in a mortgage-free house less than ten years old. They insist that they do not regret immigrating. They are happy with Canada.

I too am relatively happy with Canada. Born months after their arrival, I shared their hopes and aspirations, partaking in the country’s rapid expansion of personal and collective wealth in the first three postwar decades, and benefitting from newly created, social-security programs. Few Canadians at the time considered that this expanding good life was reversible. That naiveté began to erode in the late-1970s as the country’s major media began bombarding Canadians with accounts about growing government debt, social security programs that cost too much, unemployment, violence, environmental degradation, and domestic breakdown.

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My parent's late-teenage and twenty-something grandchildren and their contemporaries, whom I regularly face in the classroom, who have been assaulted with these negative media messages all of their lives, are less upbeat about their future and far less sanguine about their country. Unlike their grandparents' generation which believed that the miseries of their youth (Depression, Nazism, and World War II) were detours on the road to a better future, they believe, despite relative affluence, that their materially comfortable present hides a future of diminishing possibilities. On January 24, 1998, *The Vancouver Sun* noted that "a recent survey of 1,000 Canadians under 30 turned up the startling statistic that 79 percent would seriously consider leaving Canada for better employment opportunities." Many of this age-group blame the lifestyles of their parents and grandparents as well as the policies of post-war governments for their bleak future. They exhibit a world-weariness and a lack of affection for their country which their parents and grandparents find surprising and disturbing in people so young, given the optimism they experienced at that age.

Nor does Canada's political scene offer them much comfort. The current dominant, so-called right-wing view, accepted by all federal, national parties in Canada, with the exception of the New Democratic Party (NDP), and represented by think-tanks such as the Fraser Institute, the C.D. Howe Institute, the Business Council on National Issues, and the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation, claims that the decline of living standards in the past two decades is the result of government debt (federal and provincial) and restrictions on Canadian corporations' ability to compete internationally. They blame punitive corporate taxes, excessive spending on social programs (which waste money and create lazy people), and undue regulation of

labour and the environment for their problems. They demand that governments “create” a climate for a laissez-faire, market-driven economy, where private enterprise will run the world as much as possible. In a competitive, globalizing future, Canada will survive as a prosperous nation only if its business, corporate, and industrial sectors are free to compete without the crippling brakes of costly, interventionist, government policies and restrictive environmental and labour codes.

On the other side of the political spectrum, so-called left-leaning groups such as factions within the NDP, the Council of Canadians, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Social Planning and Research Council argue that Canada’s current social, economic, and political problems are, in fact, the result of federal and provincial governments’ acceptance of precisely these views. Successive regimes under Brian Mulroney and Jean Chretien, they say, began “dismantling the nation” by deregulating business and industry, lowering taxes for the wealthy and corporations, permitting high interest rates which drove up federal debt, pursuing a fiscal policy which held inflation rather than unemployment as public enemy number one, and cutting social programs for the poor and needy. These policies produced high unemployment and widened the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Tony Clarke of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives argues that right-wing ideologues are “reinvent[ing] the state as the political arm of big business.” British Columbia’s Finance Minister Andrew Petter noted on December 9, 1997: “Canadian unity comes from well-funded social programs.” For both Clarke and Petter, a fair tax system, low interest rates, tough labour and environmental standards, and proper funding for social programs will help maintain a unified, sovereign Canada.

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Most Canadians have problems with the extremes of both perspectives. Most agree with right-wing views that excessive debt is bad, that current tax rates are high, and that the country's social security network has problems. But most also acknowledge that unemployment (particularly for youth) and lack of job security threaten the country's social and economic order, that certain social programs (education and health, e.g.) are vital if Canada is to remain a just and fair society, and that environmental decline is a serious problem. They are dissatisfied with endless political rhetoric from both the right and the left; they trust and believe few politicians. Rather than participating in mainstream politics, if they have an interest in public affairs at all, increasing numbers are involved in issues which seem manageable and/or comprehensible. Hence, the rise of "interest" groups in fields such as education, crime, or the environment, or of "rights" movements in areas such as gender, ethnicity, or racial identity.

Unfortunately, this trend divides Canadians into ever smaller, antagonistic, narrowly-defined segments, characterized by what United States' political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her 1993 Massey Lectures, called the "politics of difference." Because they have never learned how, few Canadians seem to have the resolve, knowledge, or skill to address concepts such as the common good, national identity, or national sovereignty. Without these abilities, there is good reason to worry whether Canadians can engage in the necessary dialogue and take the appropriate steps to help Canada survive such threats to its future as Quebec separatism.

Canadians should not delude themselves into thinking that the close October 30, 1995 result removed this threat. It merely strengthened the resolve of Quebec separatists. Within three

months, their inspirational leader, Lucien Bouchard, became the premier of Quebec, promising a series of referenda until he gets the outcome that he wants. The innocuous Calgary Declaration of October 1997 illustrates the inability of current federal and provincial leaders to produce meaningful alternatives to separatism or to inspire Canadians to rally around their country. The choice of Jean Charest as leader of the Liberal Party in late April 1998 recharged the federalist forces in Quebec, and although the Parti Québécois won the majority of seats in a provincial election on November 30, 1998, the Liberals obtained larger popular support, by a narrow margin of approximately 43% to 42%. However successful Charest may ultimately be, he and other federalists are not likely to undermine the determination of separatists.

But the problem of Canada's future is not confined to Quebec. Outside of Quebec, more and more Canadians are willing to accept the loss of that province. In the 1993 and 1997 federal elections, the Reform Party, led by Preston Manning and campaigning on an anti-Quebec platform, swept the majority of ridings west of Manitoba; east of Manitoba, however, except for one seat in Ontario in 1993, they were shut out. Ironically, since 1993, the Reform and the separatist Bloc Québécois parties, neither of which believes in historic Canada, have been Canada's largest opposition parties.

A significant number of western Canadians are willing to go even further and entertain the idea of western Canadian separatism. A poll conducted by POLLARA between November 28 and December 2, 1997, for example, indicated that 50 percent of British Columbians claimed to be unhappy with their province's lot in Confederation, 25 percent believing that British Columbia would be better off outside Canada.¹

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But current political realities, whether the right/left split or the threat of the dismemberment of Canada, tell only part of the story. The reason behind the fear about the loss of Quebecois culture in an Anglophone Canada, which has been responsible for spurring many Quebec nationalists to their separatist views, ought also to be the concern of Canadians worried about the fate of a distinct and sovereign Canada, not just in North America but in the emerging global world. In the next century, the central question, not only in Canada but around the world will be whether unique cultures and nations will be able to survive current globalizing trends in economics, production, and mass entertainment (especially TV), or if humanity's linguistic, religious, political, economic, and social variety will be reduced to little more than choices about surface values such as sportswear (Nike versus Reebok), sexual orientation, television shows, "ethnic" dishes, or soccer teams.

The following chapters will define the issues at stake in maintaining a sovereign Canada. The first chapter sets the context by examining the current state of the country and the issues that confront Canadians as the ideology of globalization takes ever deeper root in the policies and actions of the country's media, corporate, and political elites, while at the same time everyday Canadians grow increasingly cynical about their leaders' ability to keep the country together or to serve the common good. At the heart of Canada's current crisis is its elite's acceptance of a liberal ideology which has dominated western countries since the late eighteenth century.

Subsequent chapters will examine how this liberal ideology has shaped Canada since 1867, particularly its economic structures; how it has fostered a competitive regionalism which has made it difficult for various regions of the country to share a

unified vision and identity; how it has created the everyday “structures” in which most Canadians live, sleep, work, and play; and, finally, how it has penetrated the country’s collective and personal space by means of the myths which underpin it.

The book will then examine the heart of the issue, namely, the premises of liberal ideology. It will argue that liberalism’s impact has been devastating not only for the survival of Canadian sovereignty but for the well-being of all unique national, cultural, linguistic, regional, and community identities. It will offer suggestions for restoring the health of the communities and regions in which Canadians live so that they can feel that they belong to their communities and to their regions, that is, that they can be content with the places they call *home*. While some observers of the Canadian scene believe that strong regions stand in the way of a unified and healthy country, Canada will function and remain sovereign only if its regions and communities are unique, strong, and healthy. A country is as weak as its weakest parts. The whole will not function if the parts do not “work.” The book will conclude by arguing that Canada can remain sovereign only if its citizens begin to challenge the liberal assumptions which have shaped the country since confederation.

The crucial — and unanswered — question is whether Canadians can resist the blandishments of the liberal dream and take the steps necessary to preserve Canada’s sovereignty.

NOTES

- 1 The same poll had 50 percent of Quebecers feeling dissatisfied with Canada, and 31 percent believing they would be better off outside Canada.