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Canada/Quebec

National question won't go away

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Support for the pro-Quebec-sovereignty Bloc Quebecois was lower than in previous elections, renewing the hopes of the English Canadian establishment that the pro-sovereignty camp will defeat itself. Nevertheless, the unresolved national question continues to generate instability and turbulence.

The election result revealed an ongoing high degree of polarisation around the Quebec question. This was coupled with regional antagonism and very extreme variations in regional voting patterns in the rest of Canada. The Liberals swept Ontario, Canada's most populous province and centre of finance and industry. The right-wing populist Reform party dominated the West, in part by openly fanning the flames of anti-Quebecois racism and national chauvinism.

The results indicated quite clearly that there is no possibility of reforming the Canadian federation to accommodate Quebec's national aspirations. (In a 1995 referendum, over 49% of Quebecers voted for "sovereignty").

The Chretien government asked for voters' trust in national unity. They portrayed the Liberals as Canada's only national party. Only the Liberals, they claimed, are capable of holding Canada together and defeating the threat of "Quebec separatism."

Unwilling and unable to implement any meaningful reform of the Canadian federation, the Chretien government's sole response is challenging the legality of Quebec's right to declare independence. Chretien declared in the election that a Yes vote of 51% of Quebec voters would not be enough to declare sovereignty.

Many people in the rest of Canada are fed up with 30 years of failure to solve the Quebec question while their own insecurities and problems go unaddressed. Reform Party leader Preston Manning deliberately exploited that alienation. The tactic succeeded in solidifying Reform's stronghold as a western regional party, although it failed to work in Ontario where Reform won no seats. Manning campaigned on "zero tolerance for Quebec" — absolutely no concessions to Quebec if it stays in Canada, and a hard line on terms and conditions of separation if it leaves.

Reform promotes a totally distorted concept of equality, in which Canada would become a federation of ten provinces with exactly the same rights; at the same time, a Reform election advertisement appealed to voters not to vote for a prime minister from Quebec.

Partition of Quebec?

Manning also pushed the idea of partitioning Quebec in the event of a Yes vote in a future referendum on independence. Other proponents of partitioning include both the Cree and Inuit First Nations of northern Quebec and English-speaking enclaves in and around Montreal.

Quebec's pro-sovereignty Parti Quebecois government and its Bloc Quebecois ally in the federal parliament insist that the borders of a future Quebec state are indivisible. But they weaken their own case for national self-determination by denying the same right to aboriginal nations in northern Quebec. In contrast, many Quebec socialists and part of the French speaking population in Quebec accept the right of national self-determination for First Nations.

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But there is no sense in a "right of self-determination" for Quebec's largely privileged English-speaking minority. "Les anglophones" in no way constitute a nation. Any attempt to partition Quebec, following the Northern Irish model, can only be totally reactionary.

A majority of English-speakers in the rest of Canada undoubtedly favour a peaceful solution. But in the absence of any kind of campaign to respect Quebec's right to self-determination and freely determine its own destiny, chauvinist forces could easily gain ground if the Quebeckers do one day force their independence.