

Look out! Quebec's winning conditions have arrived

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The members of the Parti Québécois have spoken, electing as their new leader a young, handsome, gay, and postcocaine André Boisclair, who has assured supporters a vote for him is a vote for a referendum "immédiatement" upon his moving across the aisle in the National Assembly. Charisma has been redefined in postmodern Quebec.

If Jean Charest's low approval ratings persist in anything like their current proportions (about seven in 10 Quebeckers disapprove of the job the Premier is doing), Mr. Boisclair will be elected. True, the two years (more or less) that stand between Mr. Boisclair's recent victory within his own party and a Quebec-wide election represent, in politician-years, one hundred lifetimes.

But in Quebec, elections are about more than individual candidates and specific policy priorities; the sovereignty debate looms over all else. And while many of us were looking the other way (at gas prices, international terrorism, softwood lumber, the Gomery inquiry and a pending federal election), numbers that look a lot like what Lucien Bouchard called winning conditions have been accumulating in Quebec.

Back in 1985, half of Quebeckers we polled reported that their preferred constitutional option for Quebec's place in Canada was the status quo, while a combined total of 43 per cent favoured one of the sovereigntist options: independence (9 per cent), sovereignty association (16 per cent) or special status (18 per cent). This was five years after the first referendum on "sovereignty association" (René Lévesque's felicitous addition to Canada's political lexicon), in which 40 per cent of Quebeckers voted Yes.

Then, in 1987, prime minister Brian Mulroney decided to right the wrong of Quebec's voluntary exclusion from the 1982 Constitution by bringing Quebec into the fold with dignity and honour. At the government's Meech Lake resort, he and the premiers ironed out an accord acceptable to all of them but, as it turned out, not to all of the country's provincial legislatures: Meech Lake was sunk. Following both the failure of Meech in 1990 and the dramatic departure of Mr. Mulroney's Quebec lieutenant Lucien Bouchard from the Progressive Conservative Party, support for the federal status quo in Quebec plummeted to 26 per cent. Meanwhile, support for the three sovereigntist options rose to nearly 70 per cent. Mr. Mulroney's next roll of the dice, the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord, failed in a national referendum in 1992 by a margin of 55 to 45, including -- and most importantly -- in Quebec.

The humiliating failure of Meech and the publicly rejected Charlottetown set the table for Quebec premier Jacques Parizeau and the new Bloc Québécois leader, Mr. Bouchard, who was elected to Parliament in the 1993 federal election together with 53 of his sovereigntist colleagues. Mr. Bouchard and Mr. Parizeau both felt the time was right for Quebec's second

referendum in 1995. Mr. Bouchard turned out to be a masterful campaigner and the Yes side for some sort of sovereignty association lost by only the narrowest of margins: 49.5 to 50.5. A sovereigntist victory would have been a roller-coaster ride into the unknown, although Mr. Parizeau has admitted recently that, in his mind, the end of that ride would have been outright independence.

The federal government, by then under Jean Chrétien's leadership, responded to the close call of 1995 with its Clarity Act in 1999, insisting sovereignty could not flow from a referendum on a "soft" question such as those posed in 1980 and 1995. (It would be very surprising if whoever crafts the next referendum question sends it to Ottawa for approval; after all, who asks dad for permission to run away from home?) In addition, the Chrétien government inaugurated a program to increase the profile of Canada and the federal government within Quebec. Canadians know how that story ended.

In a poll conducted by Environics in July, support for the federal status quo in Quebec was back to the low levels seen after the failure of Meech (28 per cent). Two-thirds of Quebecers (66 per cent) support one of the three sovereigntist options (independence, sovereignty association or special status).

Added to these winning conditions is the weak position of the federal Liberals in Quebec; even the addition of star candidates such as spaceman Marc Garneau are unlikely to stem the tide toward the Bloc Québécois in the upcoming federal election. And if the Liberals are a wounded lion in Quebec, the Conservatives are a lion with its Quebec leg amputated. A Conservative government in Ottawa, indeed any government in Ottawa, with no seats in Quebec would be unprecedented in Canadian history. This would be a surefire formula for constitutional disaster.

A vote on the soft question of sovereignty association would, I believe, win 55 to 60 per cent of the vote, were it to be held soon.

In a climate of aggravated resentment toward the rest of Canada, a new, charismatic leader such as Mr. Boisclair, together with the now-retired Mr. Bouchard, could reignite Quebec nationalism one more time -- a nationalism that, over the past 45 years, has come to fill the spiritual void left in the wake of that province's precipitous rejection of Roman Catholicism. A generation of idealistic Quebec baby boomers has enjoyed its hedonism, but as the brilliant Quebec filmmaker Denys Arcand has shown, hedonism has not filled the spiritual and cultural void left by the Church. Politics might. Quebec nationalism, in the absence of any evocative Canadian version, could prove to offer sustenance to a distinct society in search of meaning and glue.

A referendum campaign deals with a binary, not nuance. It is a time when democracy is as direct as it ever gets in this country. Thumbs up or thumbs down. In Quebec, the turnout rate goes well beyond the 60 per cent we see in federal elections or the roughly 80 per cent we see in provincial elections. For sovereignty referendums, nearly everyone shows up. In 1995, 94 per cent of Quebecers cast their ballot. That means not just those aging baby boomers but their generally politically uninformed and disengaged children will turn out for the fun. They are filled with genetically-coded personal optimism and, even more than their parents, are looking for spiritual meaning and an exciting national project, a project they feel is theirs. What does the federal

Liberal Party -- indeed, what does Canada offer young people who aspire not to be politicians in Ottawa or bankers in Toronto or foot soldiers in the American empire, but who merely want to be cool in Quebec?

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