

Canada's stability is at risk



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The real danger of separatism is the loss of an effective, stable system of government for Canada.

By Rory Leishman

To win the upcoming referendum on independence for Quebec, federalists should emphasize not just the economic risks of separation, but also the political risks of ripping apart the federalist checks and balances that have contributed to the rare record of democratic stability Canada has maintained for the past 150 years.

Democracy, properly understood, is not just majority rule: It is majority rule tempered with minority rights. Alexis de Tocqueville aptly warned that the greatest internal threat to a genuine democracy is the emergence of a tyrannical majority.

Federalism safeguards against this democratic perversion, by dividing jurisdictions between autonomous levels of government. As Canadians well know, this dispersion of power fosters endless political wrangling. But it has the overriding advantage of making it virtually impossible for a tyrannical majority to gain a stranglehold on the entire government process.

THREAT TO FREEDOM: Anyone who thinks Canada has been immune to tyranny should reflect upon the Alberta press-bill controversy in the 1930s. The province's majority Social Credit government led by premier William Aberhart touched off this dispute, by introducing an Accurate News and Information Act to compel newspapers to publish "corrections" to stories that a government agency deemed to be "inaccurate" or "misleading." Federal politicians strenuously denounced this attack on freedom of the press. Eventually, the legislation was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Correspondingly, Quebecers might well recall the era of premier Maurice Duplessis during the 1940s and 1950s — dubbed *la grande noirceur* (the great blackness) by Quebec nationalists. Former Parti Quebecois premier, Rene Levesque, first came to public prominence during this period, while working for a federal agency — the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. If Duplessis had controlled all broadcasting at the time in an independent Quebec, Levesque's critical commentaries would hardly have got an airing.

Separatists would no doubt bridle at any comparison between Aberhart or Duplessis and Quebec Premier Jacques Parizeau. In his first post-election declaration, he made a special point of emphasizing in English that his government will zealously uphold minority rights. "Because we have been for so long a minority in a country that refuses to this day to recognize officially our existence as a nation, or a people, or even a distinct society, we are extremely sensitive to the fate of minorities in Quebec," he said. "And we intend to be beyond reproach on that score."

While this statement was intended to reassure Quebec's minorities, it should give them pause, because it's evident that when Parizeau speaks of "we," "nation" or "people," he is referring not to all Quebecers, but just to the francophone majority. That's the essential problem with ethnic nationalism: It fosters a we-versus-them mentality.

The official program of the Parti Quebecois makes this point clear. Speaking of Quebecers, it rhapsodizes: "This people was born in America and considers itself from America. From the beginning, it has been French speaking and has constantly wished to reinforce the base of its culture and the foundation of its solidarity. Francophones of America: it's thus that Quebecers want today to inscribe themselves in the list of peoples who forge the planetary civilization."

When Parizeau declares Quebecers will soon have an opportunity, "to choose whether they want to become a normal people in their own country," he is implicitly speaking only of the province's francophone majority. Other Quebecers — the non-francophones — are just tolerated minorities, not an integral part of the "normal people."

In contrast, whenever Prime Minister Jean Chretien speaks of "we Canadians," it's evident that he is not just referring to the anglophone majority. He would never dream of suggesting that Canadians constitute, "an English-speaking people."

Canadian federalism is an inclusive concept. It embraces anglophones, francophones and everyone else in the country.

There is no cohesive and potentially oppressive majority in Canada. Canadians comprise a nation of minorities ruling themselves through ever-shifting alliances.

Non-francophones in Quebec are almost all federalists, because they think their minority rights are more secure in a united Canada. For the same reason, few members of the francophone minorities outside Quebec favor the splintering of Canada.

In a speech in Quebec City last week, Chretien declared that, "Canada is not a normal country, it's an exceptional, wonderful country." That's surely true, not least because Canadian federalism has served so remarkably well as an example to the world of how peoples of different languages and cultures can live together in peace and freedom.

CORRECTION

In last Thursday's column, I said that it was "at the instigation of a community activist, the Reverend Susan Eagle," that Chippeng Hom, a tenant in a former Cheyenne Avenue apartment building owned by Elijah Elieff, brought an action before the Ontario Human Rights Commission, charging him with infringing her rights to equal treatment in accommodation due to her race, ancestry, place of origin, and ethnic origin. Eagle has explained that while she outlined the role of the commission to a group of Cheyenne tenants, she did not instigate Hom to take action. I apologize for the error.