Nothing Justifies Secession in Canada

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In this special issue, the Association for Canadian Studies invites us to suggest ways to preserve national unity. I will stick here to only one suggestion: do not play into the hands of separatist blackmail.

We must always think about how we can improve our country. I have had the privilege of participating in reforms that, I believe, have well served the public interest, including constitutional amendments allowing the secularization of schools in Quebec and Newfoundland. Today, I have in mind an electoral system which, while strengthening the stability of the government in Ottawa, would guarantee in the House of Commons a representation more in line with the popular vote obtained by the Liberals in Alberta or the Conservatives in Quebec. I could propose a model of political party financing exemplary from a democratic point of view and of which Canadians would be very proud. I would stimulate investments in decarbonized energy sources everywhere, particularly in Alberta. I would truly expand French immersion schools, and so on.

I am convinced that all these reforms would be useful for national cohesion. But what I will not do is present them as being necessary for the preservation of national unity or as a response to separatist grievances. Canada, as it is today, in no way deserves to be split. This state is a remarkable human achievement, a great democracy, one of the most admired countries in the world, and for good reason. When people are asked where they would like to live if not in their own country, Canada is always on the podium or not far from it.

We must resist the temptation to push our reform ideas by presenting them as vital to Canada's survival, necessary to make it acceptable. This amounts to making a huge concession to the separatist argument, perfectly circular, which comes down to saying this: We are separatists because Canada does not work, and the proof that Canada does not work is that we are separatists.

If Canada does not work, show us a country that works!

Regarding the distribution of federal and provincial powers, if one thinks that some would be better exercised by the provinces, it must be with the aim of improving public service and not in the vain hope of appeasing the separatists. They will never be satisfied with piecemeal

transfers of powers. They dream of a country of their own. That is why the Quebec separatist movement persists even though Canada is, according to several indicators, the most decentralized federation in the world, where the government of Quebec exercises numerous special powers.

The secessionists will welcome any new power granted to their provincial government as a step towards obtaining all powers. They will accept 50% separation, then 60%, 65%... and will continue to push until they achieve full separation. Each concession encourages them to claim even more powers, transfers of resources, and symbolic recognition, until the final dislocation.

This constant pressure to grant more and more powers, resources, and other concessions to a province, in order to convince it not to secede from the country, is a sure way to exacerbate the jealousy of other parts of the country. The perception will spread that the federal government only gives in to separatists, that the province in question is its favorite, that the citizens and provinces loyal to the country are put second, and that, consequently, the other provinces would also benefit from resorting to the threat of separation to get a larger share of the pie.

This resentment against the 'separatist' province, perceived as a spoiled, whining child, in turn spreads the feeling, among the very inhabitants of this province, that they are rejected by the rest of the country. The secessionists will use this feeling of rejection to promote their cause. In the end, citizens of all provinces and territories may come to see their country as the site of a perpetual conflict, and separation as a way to achieve peace.

If ever another pipeline were to be drilled to the Pacific Ocean, it should be in the name of the general interest of Canada, and not to appease certain Albertan separatists. Otherwise, the temptation would become too strong for them, encouraged by this success, to double down. And what should the people of British Columbia think? That they should have threatened to secede in order not to be imposed a pipeline they did not want?

Since any negative response from the federal government to a demand for reform is presented as unacceptable, a slap to the nation, evidence in itself that secession is necessary, secessionist leaders are freed from the obligation to justify and explain their project. All they have to do is repeat the mantra: 'Since Canada said no to us, let's leave!' In the end, the why and how of secession are no longer the subject of a thorough debate.

I remember how, when I was Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, I had difficulty dissuading my federal minister colleagues from proclaiming loudly and proudly, after every success of a federal-provincial meeting (on health funding, fishing quotas, etc.): this is proof that Canada works! So, I would tell them, if we hadn't reached an agreement at this conference, would that have been proof that Canada doesn't work? There have been so many of these so-called last-chance conferences, where it was as if the very existence of the country was at stake.

This is how discussions about reform projects become embittered, how normal disagreements come to take on enormous dimensions, while the prospect of secession, on the other hand, is trivialized. It comes to be seen as something relatively simple to achieve, the culmination of a gradual evolution toward greater autonomy. We forget that secession is actually a rupture, a serious act, the loss of citizenship across the entire national territory, the transformation of fellow citizens into foreigners, a completely unusual dislocation in a democracy.

Let's look around us: everywhere in the democratic world, the integration of immigrants and policies to fight climate change create tensions, but only in Canada have they led to secessionist claims. We show a leniency toward the secessionist argument that is seen nowhere else.

Before the 1998 Supreme Court Opinion and the 2000 Clarity Act that gives it effect, normal disagreements

tended to be seen as existential, and secession as a simple solution within reach. Secession must be presented as it is: an extreme, existential measure, very difficult to implement and full of uncertainties. Presenting it for what it is is not 'fearmongering'; rather, it is a responsibility that falls on us. We must meditate on this quote by Jocelyne Bourgon, Clerk of the Privy Council during the 1995 Quebec referendum, taken from her recent book: in A Public Servant's Voice, UTP, 2026, pp. 97-98:

"Another observation is that avoiding talking about the tough questions concerning the separation of a province for fear that it might inflame the situation has served no one interest – not the people of Quebec, other Canadians, the provinces, or the government of Canada".

As a project of rupture between Canada and the secessionist province, the secession process is also a serious cause of polarization within the province's own population. The latter is not a monolithic entity, but a society that the secessionist attempt risks fracturing. Hence the irresponsibility of attempting secession without clear support, with an uncertain, divided population, split down the middle.

It is also necessary to highlight that the attempt at secession induces fractures that can have territorial consequences. Thus, if certain Indigenous peoples were to hold their own referendums to remain in Canada with their territories, as they did during the Quebec referendums of 1980 and 1995, such democratic initiatives could no longer be ignored by the authorities and the political-media class as was the case in the past. The Supreme Court's Opinion and the Clarity Act have clarified these issues, so that no one will be able to ignore them.

In summary, Canada is far from perfect, we all have our ideas to improve it, but presenting our reform projects as an antidote to secession is a mistake that produces a cascade of perverse effects that fuel separatism.

We must no longer play in this movie, whether in the role of the one who demands or of the one who yields. We must stop this sterile bargaining that devalues both ourselves and our country. If I did not feel any attachment to Canada and saw no ideal in it, but only a simple instrument to acquire increasing autonomy and ensure the transfer of more and more resources to Quebec, a sort of long process of detachment, then I would prefer to be a separatist. There is more pride and honor in wanting your own country than in staying in a country solely to extract more and more power and special status from it.

Faced with the possibility of other self-determination referendums in Canada, let us present secession for the extreme break that it is. Let us make it known that the unilateral secession procedure envisaged by the PQ leaders would be rejected by all the countries of the world, and that instead, in the case of clear support for secession, it would be necessary to go through a demanding constitutional negotiation aimed at protecting the rights of everyone.

And let us present Canada for what it is, a tremendous achievement, built through our complementary efforts, which we can only improve if we all stay together.