Some Reflections on a Potential Third Referendum on Quebec

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Recently, independence has once again become a central issue in Quebec political debate because of the favorable position of the Parti Québécois (PQ) in opinion polls and the commitment by its leader, Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, to hold a referendum by 2030 if his party succeeds in forming a majority government following the provincial election scheduled for October 5, 2026. If this scenario were to occur, it would be the third referendum on Quebec independence, following those of 1980 and 1995, the latter ending in a very narrow victory for the "No" camp.

Since that second referendum, support for independence has experienced significant fluctuations, with marked increases in 1996, when Lucien Bouchard became premier, and in the mid-2000s following the sponsorship scandal. Conversely, other events, such as the 1998 ice storm, the PQ's electoral defeat in 2014, or, more recently, Donald Trump's return to the White House and the resulting trade war between Canada and the United States, have coincided with a decline in support for independence.

At the beginning of March 2026, according to a Léger poll, support for independence was slightly below the 30% mark, the lowest level measured in several decades. Two weeks earlier, an Angus Reid poll showed that only 15% of respondents firmly supported independence, with an additional 11% leaning toward that option. Furthermore, the idea of organizing a third referendum by 2030, proposed by Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, is itself unpopular. In this context, the Quebec Liberal Party and the Coalition Avenir Québec have an easy time denouncing the idea and placing opposition to holding a third independence referendum at the center of their electoral strategy against the PQ.

However, it is important to keep in mind the simple fact that certain more or less predictable events have long contributed to fluctuations in support for independence, in one direction or another. Thus, much like the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990 or, fifteen years later, the

sponsorship scandal, the Supreme Court's decision concerning Bill 21 on state secularism and the use of the notwithstanding clause could suddenly increase support for independence. At the end of March 2026, the Supreme Court of Canada held hearings on a case concerning this law (English Montreal School Board, et al. v. Attorney General of Quebec, et al.), and a decision is expected later this year or, at the latest, in early 2027. The content and timing of this decision could have major electoral and political consequences, particularly in Quebec.

Beyond what might happen regarding this sword of Damocles, in the event of a referendum on Quebec independence in the coming years, at least six elements would make the political dynamics of such a referendum different from those of 1995.

The first element is the Clarity Act (2000). This law gives the House of Commons the prerogative to judge the clarity of both the referendum question and the result. In the event of a clear result in favor of secession arising from a question also deemed clear, the Government of Canada would have the responsibility to negotiate secession in accordance with democracy, federalism, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities. Quebec's National Assembly rejected the Clarity Act, adopting its own Act respecting the exercise of the fundamental rights and prerogatives of the Québec people and the Québec State (Bill 99, 2000), which stipulates that only the National Assembly may determine referendum rules and that the majority considered sufficient to trigger secession is 50% plus one.

To what extent would the House of Commons choose to invoke the Clarity Act? First, would it decide that the question lacked clarity if it strayed too far from wording such as "Do you want Quebec to become an independent state?" In recent years, the Quebec sovereigntist approach appears to have moved closer to a question dealing directly with independence, without reference to association or partnership with Canada, but it would be tempting for a PQ government to opt for a vaguer question in order to maximize the chances of obtaining a majority. Second, would the House of Commons decide that the majority required to trigger the secession process should be greater than 50% plus one and, if so, what majority would it deem necessary? If the governments of Canada and Quebec were in conflict regarding the referendum question or the majority needed to lead to secession, the Government of Canada could choose not to participate in a referendum campaign and not to recognize the result, which could significantly change the dynamics of such a campaign and its aftermath.

The second element is the Indigenous question. In the context of the 1995 referendum, this issue occupied a marginal place. Indigenous leaders had mostly indicated that their peoples wished to remain within Canada and maintain their relationship with the Crown. This position appeared to represent only a minor problem for the PQ, which insisted on Quebec's territorial integrity. Yet the PQ's secessionist position creates a clear paradox regarding Indigenous peoples: if Quebec's right to self-determination takes precedence over Canadian territorial integrity, why would Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination not take precedence over Quebec's territorial integrity? Both political discussion and the state of the law concerning Indigenous peoples, not only in Canada but internationally, have changed considerably since 1995, making it difficult for the PQ to avoid the contradiction its project creates regarding self-determination and territorial integrity.

A third element distinguishing the situation of 1995 from today is the greater ideological and political division within Quebec. In 1995, it was easy to build "Yes" and "No" camps, at least within Quebec's political sphere. More specifically, supporters of independence were grouped essentially within the PQ, and relations with the other (small) party then supporting independence (the Action démocratique du Québec, ADQ) were not bad. Left- and right-wing sovereigntists agreed to set aside their

ideological differences and unite to achieve their common goal. Today, in the context of major political and ideological differences between the PQ and Québec solidaire (QS), characterized by divergent positions on issues such as immigration and secularism, unity within a "Yes" camp would represent a significant challenge.

A fourth element is free trade. In 1995, North America was in a political and ideological free-trade context. The PQ's political discourse regarding the economic consequences of independence was strongly oriented toward the idea that the Quebec economy was becoming less dependent on the market represented by the rest of Canada because of growing trade flows with the United States. Thus, the PQ could seemingly credibly argue that, regardless of Canada's reaction to Quebec secession, there would remain a key market that would stay accessible: the American market. In the context of the United States abandoning the principles, if not the structures, of North American free trade, this type of argument would be much more difficult to make. The fact that the PQ now appears to advocate for an independent Quebec adopting its own currency may be the result of recognizing the political and economic changes in North America initiated by Trump's second presidency.

That presidency represents a fifth element that would give an entirely new dynamic to a third referendum on Quebec independence. Considering Trump's remarks about Canada potentially becoming the 51st state of the United States, it seems likely that, if such a third referendum were held within the next three years, President Trump might see it as an opportunity to break up Canada and annex at least part of its territory. Even if the referendum took place after the end of Trump's second presidency, it is possible that his successor would remain within the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement. In that case, such a leader could see a potential Quebec secession as an opportunity to deploy, or increase, American power vis-à-vis its northern neighbors.

Finally, the last element that would make the dynamics of a third referendum on Quebec independence different from those of 1995 is social media. First, their use lends itself particularly well to foreign interference. Second, the referendum debate would likely take place partly through these platforms, with all the unpredictability that would entail.