

Sovereignty and Jacques Parizeau

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IN his short, unhappy premiership, Jacques Parizeau gave Quebeckers ample reason to question his judgment and credibility. He used words like molotov cocktails. When he compared the fate of Quebeckers to "lobsters in a pot" or blamed "money and the ethnic vote" for defeating sovereignty, he laid bare his private rages and his public irresponsibility.

Today we see the depths of his recklessness. In his new book, Mr. Parizeau tells us that he would have declared the province of Quebec a sovereign state within days of the referendum on October 30, 1995. He denied the reports yesterday, but the prepublication excerpts suggest otherwise.

Mr. Parizeau would not have waited for the outcome of the negotiations on partnership with Canada, which was the heart of the question. He would have ignored the margin of victory, however small, and the economic consequences, however large. No, the puffed-up Mr. Parizeau, fancying himself a statesman, would have declared the Republic of Quebec and sought a seat at the United Nations, presumably between Qatar and Rwanda. That is what fanatics do and that is what Mr. Parizeau is.

Well, a skeptic might say, a unilateral declaration would never have happened anyway. Mr. Parizeau's book is just silly posturing from a discredited poseur who misses politics. He wouldn't have declared sovereignty because he couldn't have acted without Lucien Bouchard and Mario Dumont, his co-signatories, and the support of the National Assembly.

All that, though, cheerfully denies Mr. Parizeau's past. He was always a militant on sovereignty, so opposed to gradualism that he left the party in anger in 1984. His *raison d'être* in power, as in opposition, was independence, which is why he resigned immediately after the referendum. His government was run by people such as vice-premier Bernard Landry, as zealous as he was. His ministers spent months preparing for independence, seeking recognition in foreign capitals, vying for the loyalty of Quebeckers in the military, planning massive intervention in the money markets to stabilize the currency.

In that light, it seems perfectly credible that Mr. Parizeau would seize the first opportunity to declare independence. He was an *homme de la situation*, and here was his moment. Did he care that he had lied to Quebeckers, refusing to tell them that they would be citizens of a sovereign state within ten days? Did he care that he was contemptuous of democracy, using false promises of association to win support for sovereignty?

His assertion, made out of pique, pettiness or sorrow, has convulsed the election campaign and deflated the sovereigntists. It has two welcome effects.

First, it weakens the credibility -- if not the competence -- of Mr. Bouchard. He was the chief salesman in the campaign and was to be chief negotiator afterward. If he didn't know of Mr. Parizeau's plans, he should have. If it can be shown that he had knowledge of this deceit, he would have to resign his office.

Second, it explains why the federal government went to the Supreme Court on the legality of separation and its strategy of demanding a clear question and rules of procedure. The secessionists cannot be trusted to run their own referendum.

For this we can thank Mr. Parizeau. With every clumsy intervention, with every assertion and every denial, he gives new hope to federalism in Quebec. He deserves the Order of Canada, upside down.

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