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# SOVEREIGNTY –

## *Parizeau just doesn't get it*

Elections votes on Quebec independence are separate issues. To treat them as anything less, say ALAIN GAGNON and RAFFAELE IACOVINO, reduces the sovereignty movement to cynical politicking

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It is the season of ideas in the Parti Québécois, and Jacques Parizeau is in full bloom.

His talents are irrefutable. He has already secured his place in Quebec history, with contributions to Quebec nation-building that include the Caisse de dépôt et placement, the Quebec Stock Savings Plan and a

variety of progressive fiscal policies.

His most recent statements on Quebec separation, however, should be interpreted as a strategy to attract the hurried sovereigntists to support him before the PQ national council later this month, and the party convention in June, where both the leadership and the party's platform will be reviewed.

Since 1974 -- when René Lévesque and Claude Morin developed the strategy of étapisme, a commitment to responsible governance with a separate pursuit, in stages, of sovereignty-association -- Mr. Parizeau has continued to act as

the self-proclaimed guardian of the party's militant base. The hard-liners rush to his side, and the debate, seemingly settled 30 years ago, resurfaces. Any aspiring leader will now have to position himself or herself along this divide.

This posture was also evident in Mr. Parizeau's rejection of Pierre-Marc Johnson's conciliatory efforts after René Lévesque's *beau risque* strategy to support Brian Mulroney's Conservatives, and later, his impatience with Lucien Bouchard's insistence on fostering "winning conditions" for subsequent referendums.

However, when Mr. Parizeau came to power, he was forced to abide by party dictates to serve as the premier of a governing party with sovereignty constituting a separate issue. He had no choice then, and the party has no choice now.

Mr. Parizeau wants to build on the Bloc Québécois electoral success, and proposes that the PQ clearly state its intention to proceed with full sovereignty in its party platform for the next election. In the event of an election victory, with a majority government in place (but not

necessarily with 50-per-cent-plus-one of the popular vote), the party would proclaim independence without calling a referendum. In this view, Quebec entered Confederation through a legislative vote, and it could opt out in the same manner. A new constitution would establish Quebec citizenship and the creation of a constitutional court, and this may or may not be submitted to Quebecers for ratification.

We believe that Mr. Parizeau is correct in stating that Quebec's ability to determine its political and constitutional future is presently stymied by the federal Liberal government. Stéphane Dion's Clarity Act is tantamount to a veto, akin to the power of disallowance, whereby the Canadian Parliament can override Quebec's National Assembly by a statutory act. That disregards the principle of federalism that was confirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada in the 1998 reference case on Quebec secession.

By endowing itself with the prerogative to determine whether a referendum question is clear, the federal government reduces the constitutional options for Quebecers to two: secession or

the status quo. Astonishingly, Parliament has determined that it alone would serve as the interpreter of what constitutes a clear majority, challenging the universally accepted 50-per-cent-plus-one formula and conceding that some votes count more than others, an obvious affront to liberal democracy.

Notwithstanding these points of agreement, Mr. Parizeau's response is fundamentally illegitimate and reduces the sovereignty movement to cynical politicking worthy of recent developments in Ottawa, including Adscam. Sovereignty should not be based on a contingent knee-jerk reaction, a let's-show-them logic. That would subvert a referendum process that has been deemed legitimate by international observers and by a central institution, the Supreme Court of Canada.

The court has ruled that a transparent referendum process endows Quebec with the right of self-determination. The ruling requires the rest of Canada to negotiate any new political relationship as an equal partner. That is a clear validation of the legitimacy of Quebec's right to self-determination and should

serve as a starting point for denouncing unilateral measures on both sides -- the Clarity Act, which neglects the spirit of mutual justification, and Mr. Parizeau's referendum election, which only serves to provide the rest of Canada and the international community with ammunition for not recognizing Quebec's otherwise legitimate case for sovereignty.

Mr. Parizeau's strategy may appease party activists, but it does nothing to alter the basic political and social philosophy that underpins the legitimacy of the independence movement. The PQ has indeed demonstrated its ability to govern, having been in power for 18 of the past 28 years. That does not undercut the movement by implicitly endorsing the status quo. Rather, along with Quebec's commitments to liberal-democratic principles and the Supreme Court's ruling of 1998, it adds to the arsenal of irrefutable arguments for recognition in the event of a favourable referendum.

Only then should Quebec embark on establishing its founding constitution as an independent state -- not as a vengeful ploy in response to objectionable

dealings in Ottawa. This constitutes the right course for a mature social and political project.

Mr. Parizeau contends that Quebecers would be forced to reflect on the values they hold, what kind of society they want and so on. Such questions need not emerge out of a radical rupture. They are ongoing and evolving. The PQ has always been committed to large-scale consultation among a wide variety of social actors.

Yet Mr. Parizeau acts as though the Quebec nation is a lost soul, wandering and searching for itself. Have all of the positive developments of the past 40 years been a mere charade?

Quebec sovereigntists and less-hard-line nationalists alike are respected internationally precisely because they have imposed on themselves the highest of democratic standards, and this began with the party's decision in 1974 to create a separate process for achieving independence. To question this philosophical foundation is tantamount to undermining the project's democratic credentials altogether.

Neither the federal government's approach nor Mr. Parizeau's vision will resolve the persistent impasse. The movement must remain vigilant in affirming itself as the pioneer of a just process for legitimate secession, and this, at a minimum, involves an explicit mandate from the people.

Mr. Parizeau's comments after the referendum defeat in 1995 set the movement back, and he repeatedly alienates large segments of the population in Quebec. For all of his contributions and leadership, he just does not get it.

One characteristic of democracies is that losers accept their fate, and know that they will have the opportunity to appeal to the people on another day. If independence proceeds under the guise of an election, the losers will never see this day.

It must be clear that a special process is in place. That was the party's strategy under René Lévesque, and it is on this high road that the party must remain, regardless of the actions of the federal government.

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