

# Canada's political elite supports law to impede Quebec secession

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Canada's political elite, outside Quebec, has rallied behind the federal Liberal government's attempt to rewrite the "rules of the game" regarding Quebec secession.

This is a shift as strong as it has been swift. Little more than two weeks ago, the press was rife with reports that Prime Minister Jean Chretien was having difficulty persuading even his own cabinet and parliamentary caucus of the wisdom of legislating the conditions that a province would have to fulfill before legally seceding from the Canadian federation. Now a chorus of opposition politicians and newspaper editorialists are singing the praises of his Clarity Bill.

The Reform Party, the Official Opposition in Canada's Parliament, has said it will vote for the legislation. Canada's social-democratic party, the New Democratic Party, is offering conditional support. Tory leader Joe Clark has condemned the Liberals for seeking a confrontation with the Quebec nationalists rather than trying to accommodate them within a restructured Canadian federation. But his parliamentary caucus, already the smallest in the House of Commons, is publicly divided over his stand, and Elysie Wayne, the party's deputy leader, has endorsed the Liberal legislation.

Introduced in Parliament last Monday, the Clarity Bill stipulates that the federal government will negotiate the terms of secession only in the event that a "clear" majority votes in favor of secession in a referendum with a "clear" question. The prerogative of determining what constitutes a clear question and what is a clear majority is to be vested in the House of Commons.

The legislation stipulates that within 30 days of Quebec or any other province announcing the question for a referendum on secession the House of Commons will be legally obligated to give a determination if the question is "clear." Expressly deemed illegitimate are questions tying secession to the negotiation of some new arrangement between the seceding province and the rest of Canada.

The Parti Québécois (PQ) has always favored the negotiation of a new political and economic union between a "sovereign" Quebec and Canada and the questions it asked in the 1980 and 1995 referendums made reference to a new partnership between Quebec and Canada.

The determination of whether a clear majority has voted for secession will be made by the House of Commons based on a number of criteria, including the size of the majority, the voter turnout and "any other matters or circumstances it considers to be relevant." Chretien and his Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion have repeatedly said a bare majority would not constitute a "clear majority" and that a more appropriate trigger for secession would be 60 or 66 percent support.

The Clarity Bill further stipulates that should a clear majority vote in favor of a clear referendum question, secession can legally take place only through the passage of an amendment to the constitution and after negotiations with the seceding province on a host of issues including the division of the national debt, the rights of minorities and boundaries.

In invoking the question of boundaries and thus raising the prospect that a seceding Quebec could be partitioned, the federal government is making a veiled threat of civil war. This is a most dangerous game, which involves the stoking of ultra-reactionary ideas and the cultivation of extreme right-wing forces. William Johnston, the president of the English-rights lobby group Alliance-Quebec and a self-avowed "radical" opponent of Quebec nationalism, has welcomed the Clarity Bill, saying it ensures a seceding Quebec will be partitioned. Boasted Johnston, "We were treated as crazies ... extremists. They said we were irresponsible, deluded. But now this position is clearly the position of Canada." Meanwhile, the Reform Party has pledged not only to place the issue of Quebec's borders on the negotiating table in the event of

secession, but to make secession conditional on partition.

The threat of partition is one of the reasons that the Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ), the main federalist party in Quebec, is opposing the Clarity Bill. As the Montreal daily *La Presse* observed: “The theme is explosive, it risks to awaken Quebecers' visceral emotions and indicates a dangerous escalation with a Serb accent. It is the type of thing that can succeed, better than anything, in creating a consensus in Quebec and break the unity of federalist forces.”

But objections to the Chretien initiative among the PLQ and the Quebec bourgeoisie, which is predominantly pro-federalist, go far beyond this. They recognize that in changing the rules of the games on secession the federal Liberal government is reducing their own power to jockey for position within the Canadian federal state. Or as the militantly pro-Chretien Montreal *Gazette* puts it, “The federal bill also makes the threat of a referendum a much less effective form of political blackmail for soft nationalists in Quebec who want to extract more powers from Ottawa.”

There are several reasons that elite opinion outside Quebec has shifted decisively in favor of the federal government's plan to erect new legal impediments to secession. First, the government heeded those who counseled it against specifying what percentage would constitute a “clear” majority for secession. Some had argued that if Ottawa stipulated a percentage well above 50 percent plus one, the PQ would have been able to rally support by arguing that the Canadian government was giving greater weight to anti- than pro-secession votes and that democracy was being thwarted. Others felt that if the government named a specific percentage it would find itself without room to maneuver should the Quebec separatists succeed in securing a majority surpassing that percentage. By leaving the definition of a clear majority until after a referendum on secession, the Clarity Bill gives the government of the day and Canada's rulers the maximum flexibility to prevent secession.

A second reason elite opinion has shifted behind the Chretien initiative is that opinion polls show that the majority of Quebecers are largely indifferent to the confrontation between Ottawa and Quebec City. Most are fatigued by the endless wrangling between federalist and nationalist politicians over the division of governmental powers and other constitutional issues which they rightly see as alien to their real concerns. Moreover, the PQ government is increasingly unpopular, having presided over a massive downsizing of public services.

Outside Quebec, on the other hand, there is a popular perception fanned by the press, the right, especially the Western-based Reform Party, and rival sections of the bourgeoisie that the Quebec issue has too long dominated Canada's political agenda.

Finally and most importantly, the most powerful sections of Canada's ruling class are increasingly concerned about the marginalization of Canadian capitalism. They see a strengthening of the federal state and an end to the political instability engendered by the threat of secession as clearing the decks for an intensification of the assault against the working class. Virtually ever day there are statements by major bankers and corporate leaders that the country is being “lost” as a result of foreign takeovers of Canadian companies. Invariably these lamentations are tied to demands for massive tax cuts for business and the well-to-do, and deregulation and privatization.

Socialists oppose Quebec secession because the creation of a new capitalist nation-state in North America, with its own standing army and frontier guards, would in no way advance the cause of working people. Indeed, one of the major arguments made by the separatists in recent years is that secession will facilitate a drastic downsizing of public services because it will necessitate a restructuring of the state apparatus.

But working people must no less vigorously oppose all efforts to strengthen the federal state, which upholds the interests of Canadian capital against all working people—and especially a law like the Clarity Bill, which stokes extreme right-wing and chauvinist politics. The unity of French- and English-speaking workers in Canada can only be established through their joint mobilization against big business and all its political hirelings, federalist and pro-separatist, and on the basis of the program of international socialism.



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