

CHC2P Unit 4: 1960s-1980s: A Nation's Challenges

Activity 5: Quebec Nationalism and Referendums

Overview

In this activity, Quebec separatism and referendums will be examined.

Lesson

The 1980 Referendum



During the 1976 election campaign, the Parti Québécois had promised not to separate from Canada until it had received support in a referendum (a yes-no vote) on the issue of separatism or sovereignty.

Before the 1980 referendum, public opinion polls showed that the 20 percent of Quebecers who were non-Francophone would not support separation, and that about 20 percent of the population was strongly committed to separatism. The remaining 60 percent were undecided.

The phrasing of the referendum question became a hot political issue. Voters were asked to vote “yes” or “no” to giving the PQ permission to negotiate “sovereignty-association” with the government of Canada.

The question asked only for permission to negotiate. Sovereignty would not be total. Sovereignty would maintain economic association with Canada, including a common currency. Even with these qualifiers, the referendum attracted a “yes” vote of only 40 percent. The majority of Quebecers decided in the referendum vote that they wished to stay in Canada.

Language Rights in the Charter of Freedoms



Encouraged by the referendum result, the federal government under Pierre Trudeau continued to work to make French speaking persons feel at home in all parts of Canada. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, in 1982, further guaranteed pre-existing language rights and education rights for official-language minorities.

Section 23 of the Charter states that each community in Canada (where reasonable numbers are present) has a right to a minority official-language school at both the elementary and secondary level. In the spirit of Section 23, many communities in Ontario provide French language schools.

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and the Death of Meech Lake



When the Canadian constitution came home from Britain in 1982, Quebec did not sign the new Constitution Act. Premier René Lévesque rejected what had been created by his rival, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

In 1987, Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney tried to get Quebec to sign the constitution. At a conference centre at Meech Lake, Mulroney got all provincial leaders to agree on a constitutional accord that recognized Quebec as a “distinct society.” Quebec nationalists were open to

this, because it recognized Quebec as being different from the other provinces. Critics feared that future judicial interpretations of “distinct society” could give Quebec greater power than other provinces.

Trudeau attacked the accord, saying Quebec’s extra powers were unnecessary and that provincial demands for extra powers would destroy Canada. Aboriginal leaders, excluded from discussions, attacked the accord for failing to recognize their collective rights.

To be enacted, the accord had to be ratified by the legislatures of all ten provinces within three years. In 1990, Cree MLA Elijah Harper refused to approve the accord in Manitoba’s Legislative Assembly.

The Meech Lake Accord was dead.

The Formation of the Bloc Québécois

At the time of the Meech Lake accord, Progressive Conservative cabinet minister Lucien Bouchard resigned from the Mulroney government.

With several other Quebec Members of Parliament, in 1990, he formed the Bloc Québécois, a federal party dedicated to Quebec sovereignty. Under Bouchard, the Bloc won 54 of Quebec’s 75 seats to become the Official Opposition in Ottawa, in 1993.

The 1995 Referendum and Sovereignty Association

In 1994, the provincial Parti Québécois returned to power, and Premier Jacques Parizeau sought another referendum on Quebec sovereignty. The 1995 referendum again proposed sovereignty-association. This time Quebec nationalism almost triumphed: 49.4 percent of Quebecers voted “yes.” Parizeau blamed the loss on “money and the ethnic vote,” and resigned as Premier. Soon after that, Bouchard resigned from the Bloc.

Quebec nationalism seemed to decline for the rest of the 1990’s. In the federal election of November 2000, the Bloc Québécois won only 38 seats. In 2003, the provincial Liberal party won a huge majority, ending almost a decade of PQ governments. Quebec nationalism, however, runs deep. In 2004, the Bloc won 54 seats in the Federal election and in February 2006, 51 seats.

Assignment

1. What question was asked of voters in the 1980 Quebec referendum?
2. What was the percentage result of the YES vote? of the NO vote?
3. What educational right is given in Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Right and Freedoms?
4. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney managed to get the provincial leaders to come to what agreement concerning Quebec?
5. Explain what happened to that agreement
6. What is the Bloc Québécois?
7. Who was the first leader of the Bloc Québécois?
8. What question was asked of voters in the 1995 Quebec referendum?
9. What was the percentage result of the YES vote? of the NO vote?