

OPINION

Canada is sleepwalking toward another Quebec sovereignty crisis

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The last thing Canada needs is another national unity crisis. However, there are obscure forces at play shaping such a crisis, one that will be difficult to deal with.

If public opinion surveys are to be believed, Canada will have a new government in Ottawa within a year or so. It will be headed by someone not from Quebec which, in itself, will change the dynamics of national unity debates. Five prime ministers from Quebec have held power in Ottawa for 47 of the last 56 years. New Canadians are adding a different dynamic to Canadian politics and to national unity debates. Their point of references are the countries they left behind and the promise of a new beginning, not historical, regional or linguistic grievances.

Quebec provincial politics is also taking on a new form. Federalist voices are very rarely heard in the Quebec National Assembly. Quebec's agenda is to chip

away at federal government jurisdictions and to secure more autonomy. Quebec has, in recent years, also played fast and loose with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms while the rest of Canada shrugged, including the leaders of all federal political parties.

The looming national unity crisis will extend beyond Quebec's place in the Canadian family, and therein lies the problem. Canadians are in no mood to reopen the Constitution or to accommodate new Quebec demands. Canadians are dealing with pressing and seemingly intractable public policy challenges from inflation, housing supply, poor productivity and the never-ending growth of the federal government. All regions also have their own grievances and reasons to redefine their place in the Canadian family. Their focus is on their own challenges, not Quebec.

Western Canada maintains, and for good reasons, that the Ottawa-Ontario-Quebec triumvirate has never understood its challenges or given it the political weight to match its economic contributions to Canada. Atlantic Canada does not have much political or economic weight and it is sitting on the sidelines, uncertain of the role it can play in future national unity debates while hoping for the best. Ontario, unlike in years past, is looking more and more inward to its own economic and public policy challenges. Ontario premiers, going back nearly 35 years, have preferred to talk about fair-share federalism for their province than about the glue that holds Canada together.

This suits Quebec's sovereigntists nicely. It enables them to make the case that the rest of Canada is growing insensitive to Quebec's aspirations. And, again, if public opinion surveys are accurate, Quebec sovereigntists will have a stronger presence in Canada's Parliament after the next national election, where they will make the case that Canada no longer works for Quebec. In regards to the next provincial election in Quebec, recent polls reveal the Parti Québécois is leading in voting intentions and may well be poised to win a majority government.

Who will speak for Canada when the next unity crisis hits? In 1995, 150,000 Canadians from outside Quebec descended on Montreal to demonstrate their love for a Canada that included Quebec. Where would a new Captain Canada come from to lead the march? Canada no longer has provincial premiers like John Robarts, David Peterson or Allan Blakeney willing to look beyond their provincial boundaries to speak about what is good for Canada. Ottawa is left

managing disunity as best it can by striking individual deals on the fly with the premiers.

Canadians have seen national unity crisis pop up at regular intervals with some, like the 1995 Quebec referendum, where the result was too close for comfort. The looming one is different, because it will arrive under the cover of darkness, because there is little appetite among Canadians to spend time or energy understanding it, let alone deal with it; because all regions have grievances against Ottawa; because the federal government has never understood that Western Canada has legitimate grievances that continue to be left unattended; and because there are now few voices willing to speak on behalf of Canadian unity.

However much we would like to, Canada's looming national unity challenges cannot be ignored. We can prepare to deal with it head-on or to let it reach us by stealth, leaving us scrambling for solutions. It's time for Canada's national political parties to address the issue in their electoral platforms as they gear up for the next general election. They are present in all communities and they are legitimate vehicles to engage Canadians from all regions in a debate about how Canada's future should take shape. They are in a position to bring together different communities, different regions to sort out differences, test prejudices and strike compromises to benefit Canada, not one region or one party leader. If political parties cannot play this role, who can?

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If you think about it, this is most plausible. One group of barbarians sacks Rome, so the rest seize their opportunity for mayhem, revenge, and spoils. I have long had grievances with Central Canada (Ontario and Quebec)—enough to have once, swallowing hard, taken out a Reform Party membership—but I cannot go along with my fellow alienated Western “freedom fighters” this time. There is nothing reasonable and responsible about them; either they are so stupid they actually believe their claims, or they shamelessly exploit those who do. TJB

Elites: they just won't learn or cede place. In America, the Democrats, personified by lifelong pol Joe Biden, refuse to face (the rudiments of some of) the truths that Trump's crowd have a basis for insisting be reckoned with. In South Africa, the same: the ANC refuses to reform itself, and the likes of Julius Malema and Jacob Zuma exploit this failure. All such Establishments think their only hope—at least for an outcome they think will leave them still in prominence—is to ride things out hoping the aroused will wear themselves and their welcome out. Cynicism abounds exploiting systems premised on ideals.