

Has Trudeau lost Quebec?

One admires aplomb or "cool", as a response to adversity. When, however, "aplomb" comes to mean rigidity — as it seems to with Pierre Trudeau — it is stupid. Not for him, but for us.

In figurative terms, Rene Levesque and the scale of the PQ victory took Trudeau's constituency out from under him. It deprived him of his base.

And that base? Surely it was a Quebec seen as in Confederation and "a province like the others".

Can he regain the base? How? Let's look at his dilemma, after noting that on election night, the next day in the House, and Wednesday to his party caucus, Trudeau's aplomb fixed into a tense, constitutional rigidity — as though independence for Quebec was not a topic for discussion or politics in federal Canada.

'Two nations' concept

Trudeau set his position immediately, and the quick confirmation of it by his caucus, has really committed the Liberals to him. Unfortunately — so I'd argue — he can't be dumped in favor of someone like Chretien or Turner who might salvage much of Canada as we know it by a change to a policy of "two nations" or "co-operative federalism".

Remember "two nations" was a Stanfield concept, and rather close to what first Premier Lesage then Premier Johnson talked about.

"Co-operative federalism" was the federal policy until 1965 when the Trudeau-Marchand-Pelletier trio arrived to turn the party and government towards "one Canada" and Quebec a province like the others.

So Trudeau can hardly be turfed out or asked to leave. This is sad, not least because outside of the French Canadians one senses the majority of Liberals think he should go now and quietly.

Trudeau really must face the electorate by the fall

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of '78. It is obvious that Levesque's mandate goes until '80 and that the great referendum on independence need not be held until after Trudeau faces the electorate.

This timing seems to set up the requirement — just as does the rigid position he has taken — that Trudeau fight the next election on the same issue he swept the country with in '68. Putting Quebec in its place. Saving Canada.

Unfortunately for him the theme is shop-worn, just as Bourassa found that the Quebec electorate could not be frightened the third time with his form of the same theme.

Even if Trudeau could pull it off, recapturing the west and sweeping most of the federal seats in Quebec, how could he get at Levesque? Indeed, the very sentiments Trudeau must mount to sweep the west almost guarantee a Quebec federal electorate hostile to him. He's an outsider in his old homeplace.

Isn't it almost madness not to acknowledge that French-speaking Quebecers overwhelmingly look to Quebec City as the seat of their government, not to Ottawa? (Perhaps Albertans can understand this best, because their premier is acting out his responsibilities in line with the belief that they look first to Edmonton).

Personal advantages

Not only can Levesque choose not to battle Trudeau directly for voter support, he has some personal advantages of great account. The first may seem strange but I think it the crucial one. On television, in French or English, he's even more effective than Trudeau. And TV has been Trudeau's grandest asset.

It has been not so much his common touch (in the sense that Levesque appeals to the common man) as the image and style it has projected of Trudeau as intelligent, quick, tough and dominating.

The nub of the national crisis, for the next 20 months or so, is simply that the PM can neither get at Levesque effectively or treat him diplomatically and with any flexibility. And Trudeau set himself in this cement, quickly and thoroughly.

If somehow he could bring Levesque to direct debate for the voter's allegiance in Quebec, his prospect is still very poor, simply because he is matched with someone more talented at the public arts of politics. This is overwhelmingly apparent on the French and Quebec stage. It would probably be true for a debate between the two held in Vancouver.

My opinion, of course, is that Trudeau and his conception of federalism became dual anachronisms last Monday night. Either someone in federal politics gets Ottawa shifted quickly to "co-operative federalism" or "two nations" or even the customs union and the common monetary system that Levesque now talks about will be lost.