

Opinion: In dealing with Quebec separatism, Ottawa should adopt the Seinfeld doctrine



The Canadian Flag flies over the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill on the 50th anniversary of the Canadian Flag in Ottawa on Sunday, Feb. 15, 2015. Justin Tang / THE CANADIAN PRESS

The time has come to express a thought many federalists are thinking but believe should not be stated out loud, possibly out of some irrational fear of jinxing ourselves: Separatism is imploding.

The implosion of separatism we are witnessing is not without a historical analogy.

In February 1946, George Keenan, chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, responding to a policy analysis request from President Harry Truman, stated that the communist foundation of the Soviet Union was fundamentally weak and that the Soviet Union would ultimately collapse. Keenan's assessment, at a time when the Soviet Union was a much feared military power, seemed incredible. Keenan advocated the containment doctrine, which was adopted by Truman and every U.S. president thereafter until the demise of the Soviet Union. Communism imploded, as Keenan predicted, because communism was an intrinsically bad idea, not supported by the will of the people.

Separatism is not communism, but it is an intrinsically bad idea. Though often portrayed in the media as having serious support, in fact, separatism, defined as the political movement seeking to establish an independent state within the present territorial boundaries of Quebec that would exercise all legislative, executive and judicial authority exclusively in the French language, has never been supported by the will of the majority of the people, which a significant political change of this nature requires. The Parti Québécois is no closer today to its separatist objective than in 1968, when it was founded.

Separation would have already occurred if Quebecers really believed that Canadian federalism was oppressive. If Quebecers wanted to separate, they would not have to be nagged with multiple referendums and referendum talk. No economic, political, linguistic or human rights imperative justifies separatism. The separatist movement is driven by and appeals to emotion. Emotions, however, drive every decision we make in our lives and, in a democracy, emotions influence how people vote.

The predominant emotion driving the separatist movement has been fear. The emotional response of federalists has been hope. Everyone knows that hope beats fear.

Quebecers live in a free and, yes, bilingual society — a bilingual society respecting the predominance of the French language in our everyday lives, but also respecting the legitimate place of the English language in Quebec. French- and English-speaking people have lived together peacefully for a long time, respecting one another, speaking each other's language and have created a unique society. We have been a bilingual society of sorts for some 350 years. This is a lot of history that separatists prefer to ignore.

Premier Philippe Couillard displayed singular courage in stating the obvious in the last provincial election debates: francophone parents want their children to learn English and this in no way makes these parents or their children less Québécois. Couillard paid no political price for his honest remarks. He won the election and has made it safe for all other provincial federalists to finally say in public what we have always known for a long time: it is smart to be bilingual in the Quebec of today and tomorrow. Bilingualism has not, does not and will not threaten the survival of the French language in Quebec.

Federalists would do well to apply the containment doctrine to the separatist movement by simply isolating and containing separatists to their own agenda, an agenda that fewer and fewer people want to hear about. Provincial federalists need only continue to do what Couillard did so well in the last provincial election: communicate to Quebecers that while the Parti Québécois will continue to focus on “country building” referendum strategies, language, identity and the

politics of division and exclusion, provincial federalists will focus on social inclusion and continue to build hospitals, schools, universities, highways and infrastructure and work on policies aimed at improving the lives of Quebecers, starting with attracting more business investment to create wealth and career opportunities, especially for our youth.

The federal government's support of this containment policy would require that it adopt the Seinfeld doctrine: the defeat of separatism is all about doing nothing. Separatists are running on fumes and would so appreciate a blunder from "Ottawa." The only thing the federal government has to do to avoid helping separatists is to deliver plenty of nothing.

With a federal election in the offing, the major federal parties are trying to get the "Quebec Question" right. The party hoping to form the next federal government should realize that the time has come for benign neglect. Federal politicians should be telling voters that their focus will be collaborating with the Quebec government on real issues. The Constitution and Senate reform are not real issues for the sick, the elderly and their families, the homeless, the single parent or the unemployed university graduate. The Constitution and Senate reform are issues created by politicians for politicians. Separatists want to break up Canada, not amend the Constitution or reform the Senate.

Our country was born of modest beginnings from a compromise of two founding language heritages working together to build a society that in time became a beacon of hope for people coming from all over the world. Our immigrants have contributed in no small way to the progress and very definition of our society. Quebec is a founding partner of the internationally recognized success story that is the Canada of today. Imagine the Canada of the future. Quebecers know that this is a lot to walk away from.

Separatism will ultimately collapse because it seeks to create a society inconsistent with our past and ill-advised for our future.

Separatism is imploding.

Mikhail Gorbachev could not save communism. Pierre Karl Péladeau will not save separatism.

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