

Partnership

In Canada, the notion that the country is fundamentally a 'partnership' of two founding peoples - those of French descent and those of British descent - is a very old one, and one that resonates especially strongly among Francophones. It helps justify official bilingualism (when seen on a pan-Canadian basis) and also Quebec's claim for a veto over constitutional changes affecting the province's powers (when Quebec is seen as the homeland of French-speaking people or the only province in which they form a majority).

More recently, Quebec sovereignists have propagated the idea of a partnership ('Partenariat'). It was implicit in the 1980 referendum when the Parti Québécois (PQ) campaigned for a mandate to negotiate both sovereignty and 'association' with the rest of Canada. When the PQ regained power in 1994, the notion was eschewed by Premier Jacques Parizeau, but the sovereignty movement failed to gain momentum. In April 1995, Lucien Bouchard, then leader of the Bloc Québécois (BQ), made a stunning 'virage' (sharp turn) by advocating that a sovereign Quebec enter into an economic and perhaps even a political partnership with Canada. This position, fleshed out by a committee of the BQ headed by Daniel Turp, was accepted by Mr. Parizeau and by Mario Dumont (leader of the Action Démocratique du Québec) in an agreement signed on 12 June 1995. In the referendum held on 30 October 1995, the actual question posed referred to this partnership agreement. Obviously, the partnership proposal was deployed to help allay the fears of the Quebec population that economic disruption would result from a Yes vote for sovereignty, and to appeal to their sense of attachment to Canada. This strategy worked well, as support for the Yes side grew during the campaign, largely because of the rising credibility of the partnership. The federalist campaigners had great difficulty countering the appealing ambiguity of the Partenariat.

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