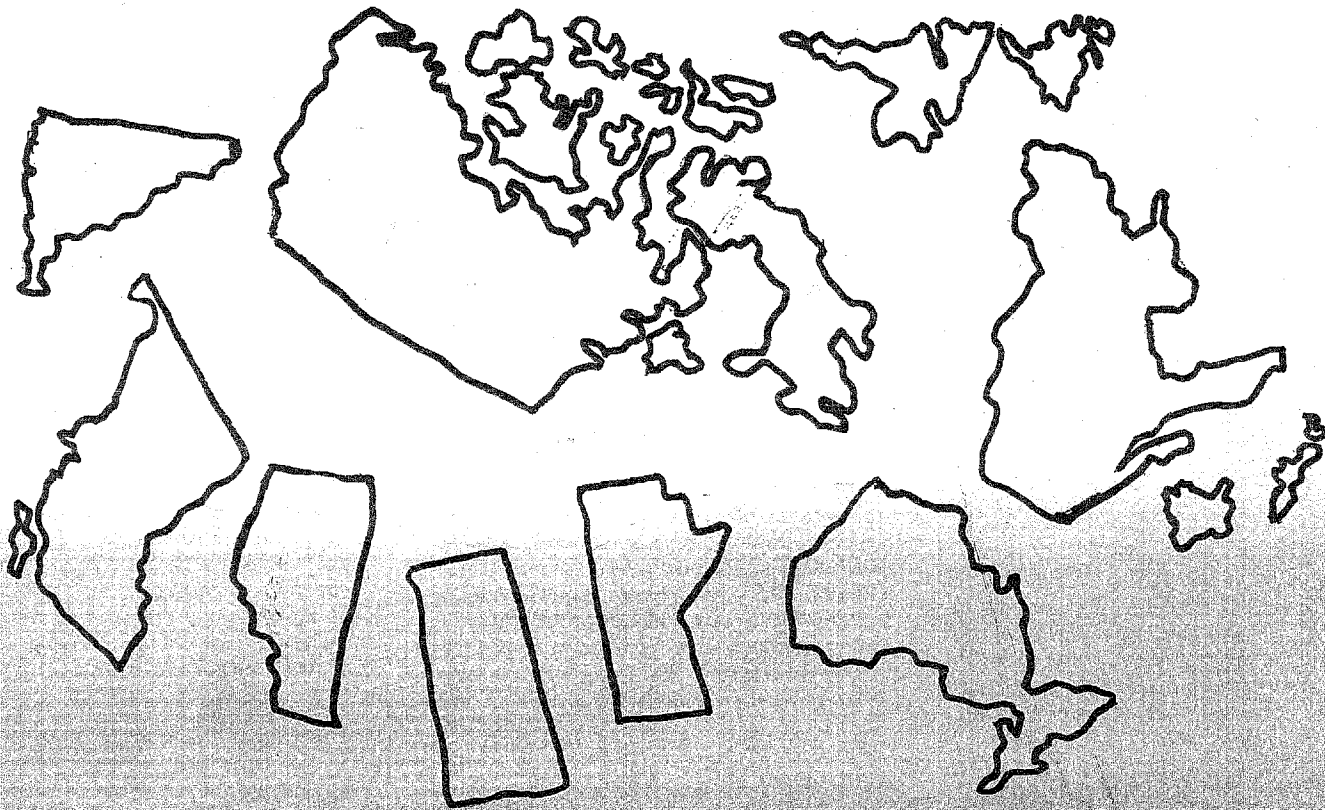


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Susan G. Cole

Deconfederation

by Eve Zaremba

The Quebec referendum is over: federalism won; Canada is safe. Right? To which I say: so what?; which federalism?; and, not at all.

I have always been highly ambivalent about Quebec becoming a separate nation-state. Not because I have ever doubted that Quebec is a nation. It has a viable indigenous culture, and in that respect is not and never has been 'a province like the others'. But every nation needn't be a separate state. My ambivalence arises from a number of factors, among them a general lack of faith in the efficacy of statehood. I am highly sceptical of the proposition that setting up yet another state will somehow solve problems. In the case of Quebec, it seems to me that its culture and language flourish without 'sovereignty' and there is no evidence to suggest that national control of the economy is likely to increase under 'association' (or even without it) by more than some window dressing.

The drive towards further break-up of old empires is perfectly understandable on emotional grounds. Unfortunately, lack of real popular commitment to economic independence makes these new states all the easier for new imperialism to gobble up. Without a strong economic and cultural basis the continuing fragmentation of the world into weak and mutually hostile states appears to me to be regressive.

On this score my concern is not only, or even primarily, for Quebec. It's for the rest of us, Canadians outside Quebec. My fear is that Quebec separation would remove the last remaining bulwark against the centrifugal force affecting all parts of Canada. Remove the key-stone which is Quebec, and

Canada might well fly apart.

At specified intervals during the next year or so we will be privileged to witness constitutional conferences at which our masters will be deciding the future of Canadian federation and incidentally our fate. We will be anxious spectators to the muscle-flexing of nine anglophone provincial bosses protecting and expanding their power over their fiefdoms. We will see the federal government give up some of its powers piece-meal to men who will use it no more wisely and even less consistently and equitably. Surely our provincial leaders are no improvement on federal politicians. They provide no reason to believe (or even hope) that a fragmented Canada will be any better, better off or better governed.

So, selfishly, I am glad that Quebec is still part of our political structure. With Quebec out of Confederation I can envisage the following scenario...

It starts with a rump federal government being controlled by non-federalists if not anti-federalists: government too weak to provide any realistic opposition to the total dismemberment of Canada. There would be no overall power to mediate the inevitable confrontation between Central Canada — where the people are (a fact seldom noted these days), and Western Canada, where the scarce resources are. Without a concept of communality greater than our respective narrow self-interests, why would we stay together? My scenario assumes that the men who decide these things are at bottom motivated only by money and the sort of power that money will buy.

A separatist case for the West is simple. Classic Adam Smith capitalism calls for buying cheap and selling dear. Western Canada has oil, natural gas, coal, potash, uranium, timber, wheat, fish... In a world of scarce resources, the old saw about hewers-of-wood and drawers-of-water takes on a very different, very affluent cast. An economic colony need not be poor. Japan, rich yet lacking natural resources of its own, is avidly seeking to secure supplies. It will pay top dollar for everything Western Canadians care to draw or hew. With this wealth Westerners can buy all the manufactured goods and exotic luxuries on the world market at the lowest prices going. Unless cut short by nuclear or environmental disaster, Western Canadians, unencumbered by the price of federation, can live off the fat of the land for a generation, maybe more.

This may sound far-fetched. But is it? Our resources have been for sale for so long that there is no historical or psychological reason for any Canadians to turn down a 'good deal.' If Canada as presently constituted has had problems building an identity strong enough to avoid absorption, what chance would any fragment of Canada have on that score?

Should Canada fragment, the Maritimes would probably turn to the USA. Connections with New England states are already strong. Perhaps Americans could be persuaded to accept them into a common market and eventually grant them statehood. Maritime population and industrial base are too small to markedly affect the power dynamics within the

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