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Bourassa's gamble

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Clever ultimatum poses problem for prime minister

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QUEBEC — Premier Bourassa has made a gambler's decision.

By staking his prestige on gaining constitutional jurisdiction over immigration and communications, he must come away a winner or risk serious losses to the Parti Québécois in the next election campaign. That campaign, whether Bourassa succeeds or not, inevitably will be fought on the results.

An amended constitution — or serious promise of one — including enshrined guarantees of Quebec's "cultural sovereignty" would leave the Parti Québécois struggling hard to convince voters that formal independence is necessary.

However, if the federal government maintains its uncompromising refusal to modify the division of powers before repatriation, profitable federalism and cultural sovereignty will be proved empty slogans and the independentists won't have to search for arguments.

Bourassa's ultimatum is clever.

If he loses his gamble, so does Prime Minister Trudeau.

An advance of the Parti Québécois cause is not going to help the federal Liberals any more than those in Quebec.

That Bourassa would have chosen to exhume the constitutional coffin buried four years ago at Victoria without some advance encouragement from Trudeau is unlikely.

Trudeau could make a major concession by finally admitting the special reality of Quebec and claim victory as the Canadian head of government to bring the constitution home under a modern, revitalized federal régime.

Up until now, the federal government has managed to rebuff demands for special treatment of Quebec, either by according the same privileges to all provinces or by simply saying "no."

A federal state in which all 10 provinces have jurisdiction over immigration and communications is unthinkable. That leaves the federal government's choice one of ceding to Quebec or waiting until the next round of constitutional wrangling. The opponent then may well be a Parti Québécois government.

Using his preferred debating techniques of exaggeration and ridicule, Bourassa says the

choice facing Quebec is a modernized federation with English Canada or independence "à l'Africaine."

He never directly argues that independence itself would be bad for Quebec, merely that the process of achieving it would be destructive. Bourassa does not miss a chance to exploit the Parti Québécois promise of a referendum on separation before any serious attempt at cession.

In the interval between election of a Pequist government and the referendum, Bourassa predicts foreign capital would pull out to undermine economic and social stability. Unemployment and fear would doom the referendum to rejection. The consequences, he reasons convincingly, would be despair and a burning frustration which would push extremist nationalists to terrorism.

The tactical deficiency of the PQ referendum policy, however is not enough to ensure Bourassa's long-term survival.

Despite its unproportional control of only six National Assembly seats, the Parti Québécois reaped 30 per cent of the vote in 1973. It needs only to increase that percentage by 12 to tie the government party whose popular vote totalled 54 per cent, provided the PQ gains come from the

Liberals.

Another figure gnawing at the premier's nationalist conscience is the 88 per cent of his own party's delegates who at the last Liberal convention expressed a desire that Quebec be given a special status in Confederation.

A minor migration of the increasingly nationalist Liberal youth would be enough to tip the balance and Bourassa knows it.

His own political polls even indicate that some PQ voters can actually be recuperated by a more aggressive nationalist policy on the part of the Liberals.

Bourassa does not dispute the fears of independentists and instead has become Quebec's loudest sentry against assimilation. The spectre of a future federal government controlled by an English-only party is Bourassa's way of telling Quebec that it can't trust Trudeau because Trudeau won't always be there.

Until Quebec is secured as a bastion of survival, he believes, independence will become an increasingly attractive alternative to slow Louisianaization.

Trudeau's answer to the ultimatum depends on whether his analysis of the Quebec political spirit is the same.