

Recalling the brutal beginning, and heart-pounding end of Canada's 32-year war with Quebec separatism

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - October 2025

Phil can recall exactly where he was on a Tuesday in October, 55 years ago. Under the heaviest security ever seen in peacetime Canada, he, together with other delegates from Ontario's Liberal Party, attended a funeral mass at Montreal's Notre Dame cathedral. The murder of Quebec Labour Minister Pierre Laporte was the culmination of seven years of violence. The mass, conducted amidst the chilling atmosphere of the War Measures Act, also marked the beginning of a 25-year campaign designed to tear Canada apart.

Following the British conquest in 1759, the Quebecois feared English assimilation crushing their distinctive language and treasured culture. The motto "je me souviens" (I remember), the official motto of Quebec since 1939, represents to many citizens of the province a constant ancestral memory of New France's defeat by English arms 200 years earlier. The motto has appeared on Quebec license plates since 1978.

Although French Canadians retained their language, religion, and civil law under British rule, they became a cultural minority. An increasing feeling of Quebec nationalism emerged following the Second World War. The "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s marked a turning point in Quebec's interaction with the rest of Canada. Liberal Premier Jean Lesage resolved to make Quebec "maîtres chez nous" (masters in our own house). Calls for greater autonomy and eventual independence grew louder.

From 1963 through 1970, the Marxist-inspired and supra-nationalistic Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) began a campaign of terror. Multiple explosions aimed at federal targets killed eight people. The campaign came to a head that October of 1970 with the kidnapping of British diplomat James Cross and the seizure and murder of Laporte.

Six years following the Laporte murder, Canada was confronted with the specter of a separatist government in Quebec. The Parti Quebecois, founded in 1968, swept to power behind Rene Levesque, winning 71 of the 110 seats in the National Assembly. The PQ promised to hold a referendum on Quebec's political future.

The first referendum, held in 1980, asked whether Quebec should pursue a mandate to negotiate sovereignty-association with the rest of Canada. The proposal was defeated, with about 60% voting "No". However, the issue did not go away. Discontent over the 1982 repatriation of the Canadian Constitution without Quebec's consent, fuelled separatist fervour. When the subsequent meeting at Meech Lake failed to resolve the issue, that sentiment grew.

The PQ returned to power in 1994 under Jacques Parizeau, and the stage was set for a second referendum. Held on October 30, 1995, it asked Quebecers if they wished to become sovereign within a new economic and political partnership with Canada. The campaign was highly emotional and polarizing. The "Yes" side was led by Parizeau and Bloc Québécois leader Lucien Bouchard. The "No" side was espoused by federalist politicians Jean Chrétien and Daniel Johnson Jr.

The result was stunningly close: 50.58% voted "No" and 49.42% "Yes," with a voter turnout of over 93%. The narrow margin exposed deep divisions in Quebec society. Following the defeat, Parizeau resigned, famously blaming "money and the ethnic vote" for the loss.

A past financial director of Montreal-based Transat A.T. Inc., Francois Legault is a former board member of Phil's company, Toronto-based Regent Holidays. He left the business after being recruited as a candidate for the Parti Quebecois. Elected in 1998, Legault became a PQ cabinet minister. In 2018, as leader of the less radical CAQ, he was elected Premier of Quebec.

Today, as we mark the 30th anniversary of the referendum that might have led to the destruction of Canada, Quebec's less pugilistic government reflects a renewed spirit of federalism. Premier Legault is working with other premiers to confront a new economic enemy: Donald Trump. Francois Legault, co-founder of the governing CAQ, is a living symbol of that new spirit of moderation and cooperation.

Legault's government has rejected holding another divisive referendum. That decision comes as a relief to Canadians who, 30 years ago this month, held their breath about our country's future.