Canada isn't just a good deal, it's an ideal

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During the first referendum on self-determination held in Quebec, in 1980, supporters of Canadian unity not only won the referendum but also the campaign, since their lead over the supporters of sovereignty-association had increased in the weeks leading up to the vote. During the second referendum, the one in 1995, supporters of Canadian unity won the referendum but lost the campaign because their lead had almost disappeared.

Many factors could have caused this difference between the pro-Canadian surge in 1980 and its decline in 1995. I'm convinced that a major factor was the appeal to values of pride and courage.

In 1980, the political figure who best embodied these values, with lyricism and conviction, was the de facto leader of the NO camp, Pierre Elliott Trudeau. He basically told Quebecers: What? Are we really going to give up Canada, this great country that our ancestors shaped with their own hands! We're not going to back down; we're going to keep building Canada!

In 1995, the political figure who best embodied the values of courage and pride, with passion and conviction, was the de facto leader of the YES camp, Lucien Bouchard. He was basically telling Quebecers: We're going to vote yes, and by making this statement, we'll stand tall in front of Canadians, and they'll finally respect us and negotiate with us as equals!

The big takeaway is that pride and courage are essential when facing a life-changing decision like choosing a country, which affects future generations. Back home after voting, the voter wants to look their kids (or grandkids) in the eye and proudly say: I voted for you and your future children.

It is therefore essential that supporters of Canadian unity don't just stick to economic arguments, no matter how strong they are. They shouldn't let the separatists have a monopoly on courage and pride. Of course, Canada is a good deal; but it's also a country to be proud of!

It seems to me that the defenders of Canadian unity during the referendum in Alberta, Mark Carney in particular, found the right balance between economic arguments and those about the courage and pride of being both Albertan and Canadian. That's exactly what needs to be done in Quebec too, where another referendum is still possible. Of course, the Quebec context is different, but still, you can't just present Canada as an economic asset.

Of course, the economic arguments are very relevant, so we need to highlight them. We must keep showing that it makes no economic sense to put up national borders between Quebec's economy and the rest of the Canadian economy. Nobody can ignore anymore just how much borders get in the way of smooth trade. That was already the

case even before Donald Trump triggered the tariff escalation. (https://centre.irpp.org/research-studies/effect-national-borders/).

If economists have been able to calculate that secession could cost wealthy Alberta up to 170 billion dollars over the first five years, if the Canada West Foundation has been able to conclude that '*The uncertainty is too great and the risks too significant for Alberta to pursue independence from Canada'* (https://cwf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/Alberta-in-Confederation-Report.pdf), it's not hard to show that secession would be very risky and costly for Quebec

But these economic arguments, as valid as they may be, aren't enough. You can't just show Quebecers that their standard of living would be at risk outside of Canada. You also must give them positive and rewarding reasons to stay in Canada.

In other words, we shouldn't hesitate to jump into the debate about values and ideals. When independence supporters chant: 'On veut un pays! On veut un pays! (We want a country!'), we should tell them: 'Vous en avez déjà un et il est formidable' (you already have one, and it's awesome!).

Supporters of Quebec independence are eager to monopolize the values of courage and pride. They make it seem as if only fear is holding all Quebecers back from rallying to their cause. Any argument in favor of Canada is automatically labeled as fearmongering. It doesn't even occur to them that there could be an ideal worth pursuing in being part of Canada. Their argument is based on the following premises:

- Quebecers are not Canadians;
- between the two identities, one must choose, and Quebecers must choose Quebec;
- Canada is a foreign power imposed on Quebecers and hostile toward them;
- Quebecers shouldn't accept being ruled by foreigners;
- Quebecers who aren't separatists yet are held back by the fear of taking their destiny into their own hands.

Paul St-Pierre Plamondon even goes as far as calling Quebecers a vassal people subjected to the domination of another people, and Canada a colonial regime based on subordination and institutionalized lies! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pv4kKlTIxlE)

Leaving such premises unanswered, while sticking only to economic arguments, is in my opinion a big mistake.

A serious and avoidable mistake, because it won't be that hard to win this debate. Most Quebecers say they are proud to be Canadians (this is the case for 83% of them

according to a recent survey: https://acsmetropolisca-wpuploads.s3.ca-central-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/30140516/Pride-in-being-Canadian-2.pdf.: Even among French-speaking Quebecers, the vast majority see themselves as having a Canadian identity; a recent survey found that only 17% of French speakers consider themselves solely Quebecers: https://environicsinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/ENV-COT26-Quebec-et-la-federation-canadienne.pdf.

Why wouldn't we be proud to be Quebecers and Canadians? We have every reason to be proud of the remarkable country we've built with other Canadians. Canada stands for an ideal of openness and opportunity, which makes it one of the most loved countries in the world. When people are asked where they would like to live if not in their own country, Canada is usually on the podium or not far from it. (https://www.worldatlas.com/travel/the-most-loved-countries-in-the-world-56911.html). Canada can definitely be improved, but to make it better, we need to stay united.

It's actually because Canada is a real country, with a population united by very strong bonds, that it would be so hard to tear it apart and separate it through secession. This country isn't a loose arrangement that one could reshape like changing a zoning area. To erase the rights of Quebecers across all of Canada, which so many of them care about, as well as the rights of other Canadians to be in their country when they come to Quebec, countless precautions would have to be taken.

We'll need to make sure that this is really what Quebecers want: to stop being part of Canada and make Quebec an independent country. We'll need a properly negotiated constitutional agreement, with a quest for justice for everyone, including Indigenous peoples, who shouldn't be moved along with their lands from one country to another without even asking their opinion.

In conclusion, what needs to be highlighted in this debate about Canadian unity resurfacing in Quebec is that identities add up; they shouldn't be subtracted. Being both a Quebecer and a Canadian is an amazing combination, an incredible opportunity on this planet. Here's one, an ideal of courage and pride.