

B4 NEW PERSPECTIVES

A COUNTRY ON THE BRINK

BOOK EXCERPT Toronto historian Robert Wright recounts the story of Quebec's 1995 referendum battle from the vantage point of the politicians who fought it

Most Quebecers vividly remember that angst-ridden night in October of 1995. It was the night of the sovereignty referendum, the culmination of months of tension, division and uncertainty. But the nail-biting wasn't confined to our borders. Canadians — and politicians — from coast to coast were wondering if their country was about to be torn apart. A book by Toronto historian Robert Wright, *The Night Canada Stood Still*, recounts the story of this referendum battle from the vantage point of the Canadian and Québécois politicians who fought it.

The following excerpt from the book, which will be available June 3, recounts a landmark event in the lead-up to the referendum: Mere weeks after Jacques Parizeau's Parti Québécois won the general election of September 1994 and began putting its sovereignty plan in motion, the leader of the federal Bloc Québécois and the most popular sovereigntist in Quebec, Lucien Bouchard, suddenly found himself fighting for his life:

On Tuesday, November 29, 1994, Lucien Bouchard was quietly admitted to Saint-Luc Hospital in Montreal with what doctors believed was thrombophlebitis in his left leg. Two days after that, shocked Quebecers and Canadians alike awakened to the news that Bouchard was, in fact, in serious condition in hospital after having his leg and much of his hip amputated. The medical explanation was ghastly: a clot in Bouchard's leg had become infected with necrotizing fasciitis-myositis ("flesh-eating disease"), a deadly condition in which the streptococcus-A bacterium burrows beneath the skin and eats away at fat and muscle tissue. Bouchard's doctor, Michel Poisson, chief of microbiology at Montreal's Hôtel-Dieu hospital, reported that although surgeons had removed flesh from Bouchard's hip to his chest cavity, it would take up to two more days to determine whether the spread of the infection had been halted. "Sometimes the infection progresses even after amputation," said Poisson, "because it's infected a small part of the throat or somewhere else in the body. Unfortunately, it's fatal in 40 to 60 per cent of cases."

Bouchard's comrades in the sovereigntist camp were horrified. "My wife and I have just learned the terrible news about Mr. Bouchard, my friend," said a shaken Jacques Parizeau. "Our first thoughts are for Audrey and the children and for himself. All I can really say in front of the cameras is to say to my old friend, hang on. Show the same courage that you've shown so often in the past. And I hope that soon it will just have been a very bad dream. Hang on, old friend." Bouchard's political adversaries were equally gracious. "My only thoughts are for Lucien Bouchard's family and friends," said Quebec Liberal leader Daniel Johnson. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien issued a statement from Paris. "At moments like this," it read, "we put political differences aside to express our personal solidarity with the suffering of a fellow human being." Other federal politicians, including Reform Party leader Preston Manning, offered similar well-wishes and prayers. Canadian political life ground almost to a dead stop. Veteran reporters of the Ottawa beat commented that they had seldom seen such a sombre mood in the halls of parliament. "This wasn't manufactured for-the-cameras emotion," they agreed. "Everyone felt caught in the drama going on at Saint-Luc Hospital in Montreal."

In Quebec, the outpouring of public affection for Bouchard — as familiar to ordinary Quebecers as any living public figure — was instant, massive, and mostly non-partisan. Saint-Luc's hospital and the office of the Mouvement souverainiste du Québec received sympathetic notes, flowers, and gifts in the thousands. Vigils were held, candles lit, cards signed, tears shed. Bloc Québécois strategists led by house leader Michel Gauthier and whip Gilles Duceppe would not speculate on what the loss of Bouchard might mean for the future of the party and the sovereigntist movement. The prospect was unthinkable. The vac-



Lucien Bouchard leaves a rehabilitation centre in 1995. His survival against such great odds seemed to catalyze a new optimism.

Then at noon on Saturday, December 3, Bouchard's medical team convened a press conference to announce that he had been removed from the critical list. His life was no longer threatened. Though he was still in the ICU, Bouchard's fever and swelling were receding. Antibiotics had the infection under control. Recounting their patient's courage and strength through three emergency surgeries, the doctors acknowledged with visible exhaustion and relief that the Bloc leader had survived a terrible ordeal. He would, of course, face a long road of recovery and rehabilitation, but the

much heady symbolism might be counterproductive, Jacques Parizeau counselled a little perspective. "We're faced here with a friend who came out of the abyss," said the premier. "It's a superb message of life. I don't want to connect in any way anything political to what has happened in the last 24 hours."

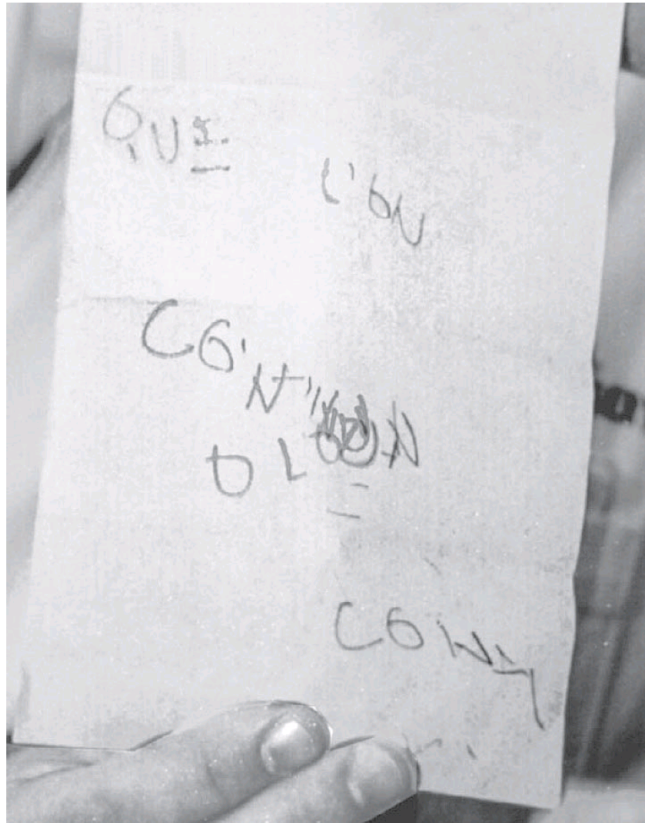
Word that Bouchard was likely to survive his ordeal spread quickly throughout his home province. As *Le Devoir* publisher Lise Bissonnette intimated, the sound of Quebecers exhaling was practically audible. "Why had Quebec held its breath during the worst hours for

Le Devoir's front-page headline for Dec. 5, 1994, announced "He is out of the woods," without even mentioning who "he" was.

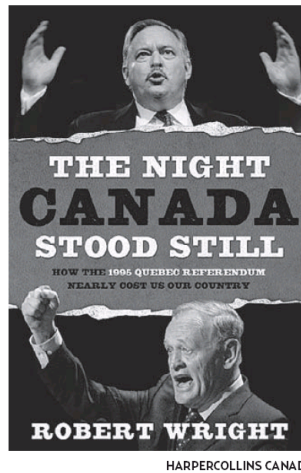
worst was now behind him. "Considering the strength of character of Mr. Bouchard," observed Dr. Patrick D'Amico, "I'm sure he will be able to return to public life — probably three or four months after he gets out of hospital."

Cardiologist Pierre Ghosn then read aloud a note Bouchard had scribbled the day before. It said "Que l'on continue — merci" ("Let us carry on — thank you"). Though seemingly intended as a private gesture of gratitude for his medical team, in the context of the looming sovereignty debate the message quickly assumed an almost otherworldly political significance. From the clutches of a unimaginably terrifying, almost medieval, scourge, Quebec's most popular sovereigntist politician had had the presence of mind to tell his loyalists to carry on with the struggle. A photograph of Bouchard's scribbled words was

Mr. Bouchard?" asked Bissonnette. "The void that suddenly opened in the political debate, on the threshold of a year of decision, made one dizzy. But everywhere, with striking unanimity, rose words of real affection for someone close whom no one could think of losing." Even some of Bouchard's avowed federalist adversaries agreed. Quebecers, wrote Montreal Gazette columnist Don Macpherson, saw in Bouchard "someone who placed principle and honour ahead of career. In his candour, his willingness to admit at least the political weaknesses and mistakes of his movement, they recognized their own imperfections and humanity. And so they accorded him the rare honour for a politician of referring to him familiarly, by his first name alone. They knew him simply as Lucien." "People who empathized with him and his family through the hours when they



"Que l'on continue, merci." Note written by Lucien Bouchard from his hospital bed took on almost mythic proportions.



tirely dissolve."

Le Devoir's front-page headline for December 5, 1994, announced "He is Out of the Woods," without even mentioning who "he" was. Federalists across Canada drew the obvious conclusion. For many Quebecers, Bouchard's miraculous recovery had generated a powerful mystique, and that would not make their job of defeating a Yes vote any easier. *Globe and Mail* columnist Robert Sheppard noted that Bouchard's legendary status now extended beyond Quebec. "I can't pretend that Lucien Bouchard is well-liked in English Canada," said Sheppard. "In fact, he is heartily mistrusted and generally viewed as haughty and perversely partisan. But the fact that the entire country was prepared to mourn and honour him as a fallen Canadian should not be undersold. English Canada has not been able to offer up a mythical counter-hero to Lucien Bouchard and probably never will." Chantal Hébert, Ottawa bureau chief of *La Presse*, agreed, emphasizing Bouchard's past contributions to Canadian life. "His pride at Canada's peacekeeping role, his stand for official bilingualism, his fight to keep the CBC and other cultural agencies financially healthy and his insistence that Canada's social safety net be maintained have reminded Quebecers and other Canadians that, to have a country worth its salt, one must be ready to defend its values," wrote Hébert. "Bouchard's actions on this front have contributed to make him, a committed sovereigntist, a somewhat tolerable leader of the Official opposition for many Canadians. No one else in the Bloc could pull this off."

A special meeting of the Bloc caucus was called to discuss how the party would continue for the three or four months with Bouchard ab-

more generally, Bouchard's survival against such great odds seemed to catalyze a new optimism. Jacques Parizeau's emotional statements of solidarity with Bouchard had undercut his pompous public persona, for example, and helped to humanize him. There was talk as well that the crisis had "cleared the air" between the Parti Québécois and the Bloc, where tensions about who was to lead the Yes campaign had been left unresolved.

Some in the federalist No camp whispered the hope that perhaps Bouchard's brush with mortality might prompt him to quit politics, which he had always said was a thankless but necessary chore. Before long, however, it was clear that the political winds were blowing in the opposite direction. No sooner was Bouchard back on solid food than he was plotting strategy and issuing instructions from his hospital bed via his chief of staff, Gilbert Charland. "I can't presume to speak for him," said Charland, "but based on the conversations we've had, he doesn't look like a man who wants to quit politics." Even worse for the federalists, Bouchard's ordeal had served to bring him and Parizeau closer together personally. "One could feel that beyond their character differences and their inability to really communicate," observed Jean-François Lisée, "there was a new bond, a complicity, that had formed between them."

Lucien Bouchard was well enough early on Tuesday, December 6, to consult by phone with Jacques Parizeau. The main topic of conversation was the tabling of the PQ's referendum plan in the Quebec National Assembly, scheduled for that very morning. Word that Parizeau was not going to postpone his presentation in the legislature gave Quebec sovereigntists a huge lift, since the premier's calculated efforts to build suspense into the process had been met by a chorus of criticism from federalists that he was merely stalling.

That the premier had Bouchard's blessing on that auspicious morning was a windfall worth savouring. "We prepared all this together," said Parizeau. "It's been months that Mr. Bouchard and I have been working together, refining the strategy and the evolution of things. We had a series of meetings together. We are in total agreement."

Robert Wright teaches History at Trent University in Oshawa, Ont. He is the author of the national bestsellers *Three Nights in Havana* and *Our Man in Tehran*. *The Night Canada Stood Still* is his seventh book.

The Night Canada Stood Still: How the 1995 Quebec referendum

uum Bouchard's death would leave in the organization he had founded and still personified would be immense. For Bloquistes, as for Bouchard's family and friends, time stood still.

published in Quebec newspapers. A banner reading "Que l'on continue" was hung on the facade of the building across from his hospital room. Biblical analogies were invoked. Fearing perhaps that too

thought he was lost to this world will never be able to see him entirely as just a politician," added Gazette columnist William Johnson. "They have forged a bond with the human, vulnerable man that will never en-

sent. It was agreed that, in the House of Commons, the job of taking the fight to the Chrétien Liberals would fall to his lieutenants, Michel Gauthier and Gilles Duceppe.

Among Quebec sovereignists

nearly cost us our country

By Robert Wright

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