

QUÉBEC STUDIES

FALL 1991 / WINTER 1992

RESNICK, PHILIP. *Toward A Canada Quebec Union*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1991. Pp. 119.

In constitutional matters the Canadian Left has never been as lucid or as influential a force as in the area of social policy. Thirty years ago the late Frank Scott of Montreal, one of the Left's most articulate spokesmen, wrote an essay on "French-Canada and Canadian Federalism." He wrestled with the dilemma of how to have a strong central government and simultaneously ensure wide freedom for the steady development of the two cultural groups along their own distinctive lines. In the end he had little to offer except pious hopes in this regard. The same piousness has been oft repeated by the New Democratic Party, the political expression of the Left. As a result, it has had virtually no electoral success in Quebec and in the rest of Canada its constitutional position has been a pale imitation of the other parties.

Philip Resnick is also a bilingual Montreal intellectual, albeit transplanted to the West Coast where he teaches political science at the University of British Columbia. While yet to attain the stature of a Frank Scott, his books, essays and articles on Canadian and Quebec politics have made him one of today's most important social democratic thinkers. In a previous essay, *Letters to A Québécois Friend* (McGill-Queen's, 1990) he expressed anger at Quebec for supporting the Conservative Mulroney government in the 1988 election, thereby ensuring the success of the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement. *Toward a Canada Quebec Union* is written first and foremost for English-Canadian readers. He claims to be less angry and more optimistic than when he wrote his *Letters*. The result is a less entertaining book which nevertheless contains some important insights.

Resnick takes the social democrat dilemma to its logical conclusion. Canada cannot possibly have both a strong central government and a strong independent province of Quebec. The time has come for English (and French) Canadians to choose. He chooses, not without some regret, a strong federation without Quebec. The time is past for sentimental arguments. Decisions must be based on self-interest and hard bargaining. He believes that both an independent Quebec and a Canada without Quebec will find their survival threatened by the United States and will ultimately decide to re-unite in what he calls a Canada-Quebec Union. This would be done by creating another level of government — a joint Canada-Quebec parliament.

English Canadians would therefore find themselves governed by provincial legislatures, a House of Commons, a Senate and a Union Parliament. Quebecers would have their National Assembly and the Union Parliament. The Government of the Union (not to be confused with the Government of English Canada or the Government of Quebec) would be responsible for foreign policy, defense, international trade, finance, including a common bank, environment and citizenship.

Resnick calls this the Austro-Hungarian solution, but unlike the Hapsburg Empire, restructured by the aristocratic elites, he sees the process being carried out by people using constituent assemblies and referenda. "For once in the history of Canada, our political elites will not be imposing constitutional arrangements over our heads" (118).

The importance of this book is not in what Resnick proposes. In the wake of the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord there are many half-baked constitutional proposals floating around and Resnick's is by no means the most preposterous. More significant is the extent to which Resnick's constitutional diagnosis and solution resemble that of the Extreme Right as articulated by the increasingly popular Reform Party and its leader, Preston Manning. At the moment, only the Reform Party is offering to play hard ball with Quebec. The mainstream parties, the Conservatives, Liberals and even the New Democratic Party are all calling for renewed federalism, an approach that may have lost its credibility in both Quebec and the rest of Canada. If most Canadians agree with the Resnick thesis and the other parties maintain their present position, the Extreme Right, not the Left, could find itself with a clear path all the way to 24 Sussex Drive. However, were the NDP to embrace the Resnick thesis, Canadians might find themselves with some real choices when they next go to the polls. His is not an easy thesis to accept, especially after so much energy and money has been spent to promote the concept of Canadian unity. But these are not easy times for Canadians or Canadian politicians. Resnick continues to ask the hard questions and we ignore them at our peril.