

## For the sake of Scotland, don't be a bad loser

Michael Ignatieff



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### Bitterness from the 1995 Quebec referendum is still rife today. That should be a lesson to us all

If the Scottish referendum result is close, the aftermath is bound to be divisive. If the Ayes have it, the Noes will deny that Alex Salmond has the mandate to negotiate independence. One can only hope that wisdom will prevail in Westminster and that unionists will accept that a Yes victory, even a razor-thin one, does give Mr Salmond the right to begin negotiating separation. In a democracy, there is no other way.

If the Noes prevail and the bright hope of independence is snatched away from Scots at the last moment, bitter supporters of the Yes campaign may start looking for someone to blame.

The most recent polls suggest where they might lay the blame. While Scottish-born voters are split down the middle, those residents of Scotland who were born outside Scotland, either in the rest of the UK or abroad, are trending towards voting “no”. In the aftermath of defeat the Scottish-born may be tempted to blame the non-Scottish-born for betraying their dreams.

This is a temptation that Mr Salmond must rise above. Referendums, even ones as generally civil and good-tempered as this one, leave bitterness in their wake, and it is the job of good politicians to figure out how to put divided families and friends back together again.

Canadians who remember our referendum ordeal know just how divisive the aftermath can be. The Yes campaign for Quebec's independence lost by the narrowest of margins in 1995 — just under a single per cent of the total votes cast. In his concession speech, the leader of the Yes campaign, Jacques Parizeau, laid the blame for defeat on “money and the ethnic vote”. It was a remark no Jewish or immigrant Quebecer could ever forgive or forget. It also disgusted many supporters of independence.

Mr Parizeau's meanness in defeat has dogged the Quebec independence campaign ever since. Mr Parizeau believed, given the closeness of the result, that another referendum was just around the corner. Nineteen years later, another referendum is on no one's horizon.

Mr Salmond should take note. If he loses, his chance of getting another one depends critically on how gracefully he concedes defeat; in particular, how he reaches out to those Scots who didn't vote for him. The same applies to David Cameron. For both sides, magnanimity in defeat may turn out to be as vital to civil peace as magnanimity in victory.

Canadians have actually had two experiences of referendums, the first being in 1980, when the Yes side, led by René Lévesque, lost by a much larger margin. Mr Salmond would do well to listen to the speech that Lévesque gave that night. He did something that leaders rarely do well, managing the explosive disappointment of his own supporters.

He quieted the crowd and patiently insisted, in the face of cries of opposition, that they had to respect the result, heal the divisions in the family and keep fighting for a “fraternité ouverte aux autres”. In a democracy, Lévesque understood, there is no other way.

There is another parallel between the Canadian and the Scottish experience that bears mentioning. In order to win the referendum in 1980, the Canadian prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, promised substantial constitutional reform, just as Mr Cameron is promising devolution if Scots reject independence. Mr Cameron may pull off a victory tomorrow, but he has to realise that the Scots will not settle for anything less than substantial increases in the power of the Scottish parliament and a tangible sense that they can be masters in their own house without leaving the United Kingdom. The surest way to guarantee another referendum soon would be to break the promises that the independence campaign has extracted from the unionist side.

There is one final message from the Canadian experience. After the 1980 referendum, Trudeau did keep his promise of

constitutional reform, but the battle with separatism did not end there. It took four long hard years of negotiation before a new constitutional settlement was agreed. The separatists have never accepted it and while our country remains united, the battle to maintain its unity is never finally won. It is the work of every succeeding generation.

Do not expect September 18 to end the argument.

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