

Alex Salmond would be wise to study Quebec's travels down the road to independence. So far, that road has led nowhere

Blog Admin

With the Scottish National Party's recent election victory in mind, [Françoise Boucek](#) suggests there are some important lessons to be learned from the experience of referendums on independence in Quebec.



The Scottish National Party's astounding election victory feels like Quebec in 1976. The separatist Parti Québécois under the leadership of René Lévesque rattled the Canadian political establishment with a shocking win in provincial elections. Like the SNP, the PQ won on a nationalist platform and the promise of a referendum on independence.

SNP leader Alex Salmond should enjoy this moment now – it may not last. In last week's Canadian election, the PQ's federal equivalent, the Bloc Québécois, was nearly wiped out, leaving it with only four seats in the Canadian House of Commons. The PQ itself has been out of power in French-speaking Quebec since 2003.

Both the SNP and the PQ were elected after a gradual mobilisation of nationalist forces, buoyed by their anti-establishment appeal. Like the PQ then, the SNP is now headed by a popular and charismatic leader.

The SNP today faces the same problem as the PQ did – running a government while making uncompromised choices that risk party splits. Nine years after his initial triumph, René Lévesque was forced to resign as PQ leader and Quebec Premier because of party divisions over sovereignty and the economy. Like Salmond now, Lévesque then was grappling with a recession. After two failed referendums and interminable constitutional battles with Ottawa, support for sovereignty in Quebec has dwindled and left the province isolated from the rest of the country.

Scottish opinion polls indicate that less than a third of the people favour full independence. In Quebec, a referendum on independence in 1980 was soundly defeated but another referendum in 1995 almost squeezed through.

Salmond suggests that a referendum might include an extra question on giving Holyrood greater financial freedom while keeping Scotland within the UK. This echoes Quebec's hazy concept of sovereignty-association. Salmond would be wise to study Quebec's travels down the road to independence. So far, that road has led nowhere.