

VICTORIA CONFERENCE
NOTES FOR THE
OPENING STATEMENT BY MR ROBERT BOURASSA

The Centennial of British Columbia

On the occasion of the Centennial of the entry of British Columbia into Confederation, I wish to pay tribute to all the citizens of British Columbia for the inestimable contribution of their magnificent province to the progress and development of Canada.

Quebec and Constitutional Review

The review of the Canadian constitution started over three years ago. Despite the considerable work involved in this, the results have not yet come up to expectations. There are many reasons for this. Some stem from the very complexity of administering a country as varied as ours. Others are due as much to the working methods adopted as to the persistence of a certain ambiguity regarding the primary objectives of constitutional reform.

Be that as it may, we are now here in Victoria in the hope of making concrete progress.

Quebec was one of the initiators of constitutional reform and we continue to believe that such reform is necessary if the constitution of our country is to become an effective modern instrument in the service of Canadians.

There are two fundamental preoccupations which give Quebec a special interest in constitutional review:

Firstly, the general responsibility of providing for the welfare of our population, and secondly, our special responsibility for the continuance of the culture of the vast majority of our population.

In order to meet these two basic preoccupations, constitutional reform must necessarily deal with questions of substance. Essentially, this means questions dealing with the distribution of legislative and fiscal powers between the Federal Government and those of the provinces. Development of a series of formal or technical constitutional provisions, such as an amending formula, will not of course guarantee satisfactory solutions to the constitutional problems of Canada.

Decentralization

Quebec shares with the other Canadian provinces the desire to set up a new constitutional framework in Canada which would better define the distribution of responsibilities between the various governments. We have always promoted the concept of decentralized federalism, since this is the only form really suited to the diversity of the economic, social and cultural needs of Canadians from every part of this country. The vastness of our territory, our low population density, the exceptional variety of our human and physical resources -- these are all factors which argue for decentralization of powers and of the fiscal means of exercising these powers. In a federal system such as ours, the degree of decentralization is often an indication of the quality and effectiveness of our policies.

However, this centralization must not be achieved to the detriment of the essential role of the Federal Government.

Respect for the diversity of the needs of our citizens cannot compromise the requirements of national unity. Quebec recognizes this. We simply ask that the new constitution of Canada should clearly recognize the rights of the provinces

to a greater freedom of action and one which is less dependent on the initiatives of the Federal Government. In concrete terms, this means financial resources appropriate to provincial responsibilities, clarification of these responsibilities in areas such as territorial development or control of the environment, as well as additional powers in the cultural and social fields. It also means that we should find an acceptable solution to the exercise by the Federal Government of unlimited spending power, since this unlimited power often results in the setting aside of a factor which is of the essence of federalism -- the sharing of powers between the Federal Government and those of the provinces.

The Identity of Quebec

In addition to sharing the problems common to any modern government -- problems of economic growth and social progress -- the Quebec Government has the additional responsibility of protecting and promoting a culture which is not only different, but is also in a minority position on the North American continent. Since it is clear that Quebec is and will remain the main centre of French culture in this country, its Government cannot abandon this responsibility.

To the extent that the new constitution of Canada may affect our future, and hence our identity, we are determined that Quebec should be clearly guaranteed the right and the means to fulfil our responsibility regarding the culture of the vast majority of our population.

The question of culture cannot be limited to language alone, since it also affects human activities as a whole: work, recreation, the family, and political, economic and social institutions.

Thus as soon as it is a question, in defining a new Canadian federalism, of examining government responsibilities, the Government of Quebec must always evaluate not only their practical implications but also the effects of any modifications on the future of the French culture both in Quebec and in Canada.

In Quebec's constant preoccupation with constitutional reform, some see only the search for a few privileges or the manifestation of a desire to turn inward on itself and live on the fringes of Canadian life.

It is nothing of the kind.

Seeking to build a culturally self-assured Quebec does not mean renouncing Canada. On the contrary, it means enriching the Canadian cultural personality with the vigour of French culture.

This is how Quebec's approach is to be interpreted -- as a wish to assert a different culture and a desire to offer Canada a contribution that is absolutely essential to the assertion of a truly Canadian identity.

The Government of Quebec has accordingly always had a dual objective in the field of constitutional reform: decentralized federalism and the promotion of Quebec's distinctive personality.

Social Policy

It was in accordance with this approach that, last February, we first raised the question of social policy, particularly income security and vocational training. Our reason for so doing was that these areas have a very direct connection with the quality of life enjoyed by our people, and with the real nature of Quebec society.

In suggesting amendments to section 94A of the constitution, we seek greater freedom of action for Quebec -- and for any other province that wishes it -- so that we may design our policies and plan our social measures on the basis of our people's needs and the requirements of our society.

Our proposals are designed to achieve a distribution of powers based on operational flexibility and allowance for the circumstances and wishes peculiar to each province. The emphasis is on concurrent responsibility for both levels of government, and mandatory consultation. We suggest, however, that this general concurrency be accompanied by provincial

primacy with respect to the formulation of income security policies.

It is clearly laid down in our proposals that no special privilege is to be granted to any one province. Lastly, our proposals meet the requirements for compatibility between provincial programs, but present no obstacle to direct payments to individuals by the Federal Government, nor to that Government's ability to discharge its responsibilities with respect to the redistribution of wealth among the citizens of the various parts of Canada.

Quebec has chosen this time to tackle the question of the constitutional implications of social policy because we feel that the existing situation is the root cause of the relative ineffectiveness of Canada's income security provisions as a whole in the fight against poverty.

We hope very much that an agreement can be reached, for we need such an agreement in order to implement an integrated income security policy, the only kind capable of responding adequately to people's needs.

With respect to the question of equalization payments, Mr. Chairman, which was raised just now, I should point out once more that when we examine the effects of redistribution among the various provinces, it is somewhat short-sighted to restrict ourselves to equalization payments; we should look at the advantages to be derived in the areas of monetary, tariff and financial policies. It should be noted, however -- and this was not done -- that in proportion to their budgets, some provinces receive considerably more than Quebec. The remarks of the Prime Minister of British Columbia therefore seem to me inaccurate and unjustified.

The Victoria Conference

Quebec has made very thorough preparation for this conference in Victoria. We have closely examined all the implications of the questions raised at the February conference.

It is thus in a positive, constructive, determined, and realistic spirit that we approach the task of representing the interests of Quebecers at this conference.

I would merely add that the citizens of Quebec sincerely hope that as our meeting here proceeds, no consideration of any kind will obstruct our deliberations or interrupt the efforts we have been making for the last three years to provide the Canadian people with a modern constitution in keeping with their aspirations.

In our approach to this complex problem of constitutional review, there should never be any concern to establish what is to be lost or gained and by whom; we must rather determine who will do what -- in other words, which constitutional powers will best be exercised by which government. Nor must we ever forget that the public interest must always be the decisive criterion in these matters. Constitutions exist not for the benefit of governments, but as an instrument to serve the governed.

Quebec maintains that certain constitutional powers should be exercised by the provincial governments rather than the Federal Government, and we are prepared to produce evidence in support of this. It is our intention to continue to advance this point of view.

The people of Quebec are as impatient as anyone else for progress in the work of constitutional review. However, they do not intend to be led by their impatience to sacrifice the essential objectives of the review process, by which we mean the substantive questions that have to do with the distribution of legislative and fiscal powers.

We have too much faith in Canada's enormous potential to abandon the task of giving Canadians a constitution that is truly suited to their needs.