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Québec's special status

It was ten years ago — on a tour of western Canada in the fall of 1965 — that Premier Jean Lesage launched the idea of a particular constitutional status for Quebec. His suggestions were vaguely formulated and did not win an immediately favorable reaction. But as the debate on French-English relations in Confederation developed over the years, the reality of Quebec's position as the heartland of French Canada became better understood and acceptance developed for reflecting this reality in the country's constitution.

Conservative Premier William Davis of Ontario and Liberal Premier Gerald Regan of Nova Scotia, for example, were just two of the premiers who, in the course of constitutional discussions earlier in this decade, indicated approval of some kind of distinctive status for Quebec.

It is not surprising, then, to find Premier Bourassa returning to this theme in preparation for talks on the nationalization of the constitution that Prime Minister Trudeau hopes to complete within the next three-and-a-half years. The Quebec premier, in his speech to a Liberal dinner over the weekend, singled out communications and immigration as two fields in particular in which Quebec needed constitutionally guaranteed powers in order to assert "cul-

tural sovereignty in an economic federalism."

His remarks were a good deal less than the "clear, precise and defined" Quebec position that Mr. Trudeau said he wanted three years ago before undertaking new federal-provincial efforts to bring the constitution home from Britain. Indeed, until Mr. Bourassa spells out his position more clearly, it will be impossible for anyone to assess it. One's appreciation of the whole idea of "cultural sovereignty," for example, depends on whether the Premier is talking about an exclusive sovereignty in Canada over all cultural matters within Quebec, or a degree of provincial sovereignty that would still leave room for the concept of equal partnership of French and English in a bicultural and bilingual federation.

If past experience is any guide, an effort to amend the constitution at the same time as nationalizing it will probably fail. Still, it would be unrealistic to expect a Quebec premier to go to such a conference without a statement of the improvements in the constitution sought by his province. In the end, Canada may simply have to declare its independence from Britain, declare at the same time that the British North America Act is its constitution, and then set about the task of remoulding it.