

p 10.

STATEMENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER OF QUEBEC

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AT THE OPENING OF THE FIRST MINISTERS CONFERENCE

ON THE

CONSTITUTION

(Translated from the French)

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STATEMENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER OF QUEBEC

If we are here today, officially, of course, it's because we were invited to again examine certain projects for constitutional change proposed some months ago by the Ottawa Government.

But what really moves us are preoccupations which have existed much before these projects and which, may I say, indeed go much further. It has been clear for a certain time now that the state of the present constitutional framework, as well as federal practices, have become increasingly less suitable to a growing number of provinces which have made this fact known with as much frankness as firmness. One can but applaud this development.

There is still another reason which one avoids mentioning, as much as possible. If there exists a constitutional malaise, and such a serious one, it is, above all, because Quebec poses a fundamental problem for Canada as a whole and it has been so for many years, if not for generations. And this problem is the inability of the existing political system to meet the deep and constant aspirations of Quebec, of the people of Quebec. We are not saying that this dissatisfaction is necessarily more visible than that of the other provinces. Since it is essentially of another nature, one even has the

impression that it always has more difficulty expressing itself clearly enough to be understood.

But, let us try one more time anyway, if you don't mind.

For Quebecers of the past century, the establishment of the federal system was to be a guarantee of their political autonomy. They perceived the new system as an insurance against centralization. The federal pact which had come to replace the Union of Upper and Lower Canada made them hope that they would be able finally, in the areas which seemed vital to them at that time, to fully assume the mastery over their own affairs. And for a long time, a throng of their heirs continued to believe this - or at least to hope that this was true.

The illusion was even so tenacious that one still meets people, today, who still try to hold on to it.

And yet, the proof has long been established that in the other society, that of English Canada, from the very outset people had understood federalism in a quite different way. Since they neither felt the same needs nor suffered the same anxieties as Quebec, the English-speaking Canadians had desired, or accepted, this system essentially because it permitted the birth of a new nationality, the existence and development of which required, in their view, a central

government which was as strong as possible. A maximum of provincial autonomy on the one side, a maximum of federal power on the other: thus was Canadian federalism launched, based on a tremendous misunderstanding the best symbol of which is perhaps the perfectly inaccurate name of "Confederation", with which we pretend to describe it.

Is it necessary to say that over the years it was not the decentralized concept which prevailed in Ottawa? Territorial expansion, the addition of new provinces, the emergence and the entrenchment of a big federal bureaucracy, all these factors have served to strengthen and, in the long run, to make dominant the centralizing perspective of the system. From that time forward and increasingly, Quebec, which already was the "province not like the others", necessarily took on the appearance of the square peg in the round hole. In the name of the principles of federalism, Quebec saw itself constantly obliged to fight the policies which Ottawa persisted in setting forth with the same constancy, relying of course on its own version of the same principles. And the law of the strongest being usually the best, proposing often amounts to imposing.

After 111 years, one must perforce conclude that this confusion - so well maintained that a multitude of citizens have, for a long time now, given up trying to find themselves in it - did not

favour the development of normal relations between the two nations of Canada.

The force of circumstances

On one side and on the other, fundamental tendencies, which were absolutely contradictory, thus confronted each other all along the way and, almost without interruption, Quebec has had to fight against the one systematically favoured by the Anglo-Canadian majority, for reasons which we can respect. The result of this was that for us, in order to safeguard our constitutional powers, we have always had to devote energy, resources and time which elsewhere in Canada one had the leisure to use for purposes which were more immediately profitable. To such an extent is this so that one could say the system is set up so as to leave us only one alternative: either to neglect essential rights or to be forever disadvantaged while defending them.

For some time now, of course, opinions have changed in the other provinces, partially meeting with the decentralizing and autonomous views of Quebec. A good example of this is currently being furnished in the field of natural resources and some among us have thus known the exquisite frustrations which can ensue. But, overall, may I say that the potential solutions which one has seen appear would only modify matters superficially without really modifying the historic

tendency of English Canada; at the very most, they would rearrange it by trying to give it a little more flexibility.

Now all of this was obscurely predictable ever since 1867, in the mind of Quebecers. Without, for all that, rejecting the existence nor the action of a central government, they had serious doubts that, at the very best, their influence there would never be other than a minority one. In order to show that they were not wrong, one can but recall that the demographic evolution reduced their parliamentary representation of 36% of the total in 1867 to some 26% on the morrow of the next elections, notwithstanding the fact that there has, at times, been in the very forefront in Ottawa, political men from Quebec, certain of whom were of great stature. But at the same time, the French-speaking Québécois know that it was in Quebec only that they could form and remain a majority. For this reason - and who could reproach them for it? - they have very naturally established there the true base of their political power. And that is also the reason why, in the collective perception as in reality, it is in Quebec that quickly was situated and is still found the government which for us is our national government. It is there, and there only, that Quebec power has a guarantee of permanence. And I ask you to believe that I have no provocative intention whatsoever in saying this: I am simply stating an undeniable historic and psychological fact.

As time goes by and our society continues to grow, this reality becomes more and more striking. It was not born on November 15th, 1976. What happened two years ago is, in fact, the consequence of an old situation which change renders less and less bearable. The Québécois are in fact more and more proud of their roots, more and more self-confident. From a passive, one might even say a resigned state, in which they found themselves heretofore, loyalty to their origins has gradually become more dynamic and determined, and increasingly, without forgetting the past, it is toward the future it is mostly looking. This society shall not be able to accommodate itself any longer with the obstacles of all sorts which the congenital confusion of the system imposes upon it. Henceforth, it demands that be translated in political terms its need for clarity and coherence.

A false approach

This need, which was not felt just yesterday, was almost completely neglected during past attempts at constitutional revision, particularly that of 1968-71. I would even say that its very existence was kept as well masked as possible.

For example, it was deemed advisable to approach the Canadian constitutional problem and, consequently, that of Quebec via an increase in bilingualism in Canada and by a modification of certain

federal institutions; in so doing, the real question was being very simply ignored and bypassed.

What Quebec asked for, above all, and incessantly, was actually that the constitution guarantee the fully autonomous exercise of all the powers necessary for its development as a distinct society.

Following many others, including Messrs. Duplessis and Lesage, these views were expressed from 1968 to 1971 by three successive Prime Ministers, Messrs. Daniel Johnson, Jean-Jacques Bertrand and Robert Bourassa. And, after many federal-provincial meetings and task forces at all levels, the result was the disappointment of Victoria. Ottawa considered that the positions of my predecessors went against its concept of Canada and that, consequently, there was no question of doing anything about them. And yet, those who defended them were trying as well as they could to readjust the federal frame and not to replace it.

Needless to say, Ottawa's attitude, as much in 1968-71 as previously, has contributed enormously to the emergence in Quebec of a new political approach and has led to the questioning of federalism itself.

But past experience does not seem to have borne fruit

since, again today, the approach remains essentially the same. If the same causes produce the same effects, there does not appear to be any reason for the pillars of the system to expect the major breakthrough which certain people seem to expect from the exercise which is beginning again. It is by now common knowledge that one should not necessarily equate the holding of a meeting with a meeting of the minds.

Faithful to our orientation, and also to pure and simple logic, we thus believe that our main contribution to this conference shall not rest in a point by point discussion of the federal project but rather in the quiet reaffirmation - and I may add, without too many illusions - of what has been called the "historic continuity" of Quebec demands. In this context, we thus table as a reference document at the very least, a list of the constitutional positions stated by the governments which have preceded ours regardless of their Party affiliations. It is by inspiring ourselves with this continuity that we were able to subscribe to the unanimous declaration of the provinces at the Regina Meeting. It is the same attitude which guides us also in the points of view which Quebec formulates at the different federal-provincial conferences. It is, of course, understood that we cannot assume all the formulations of these demands since they were set forth at different times and in different contexts. One must thus seek continuity elsewhere.

Thus, everything that one finds in this document concerning municipalities, education or culture had no other purpose than to oppose the repeated attempts of Ottawa to nibble away at responsibilities of provincial jurisdiction. In other cases, those of communications or the environment, for example, it was rather a question of obtaining for Quebec a priority responsibility in sectors which the 1867 agreement could not foresee. Finally, one finds here a multitude of claims in fields of activity which are but the natural extension of responsibilities already recognized as belonging to Quebec.

These positions of our predecessors have this characteristic in common, that they all aimed at defending the constitutional rights of Quebec against centralization in Ottawa of the important political levers without which a society such as ours finds itself deprived of essential instruments for its own development. This means that they all went very definitely in the direction of increased power for Quebec. And I am sure that I shall not be contradicted by any responsible adversary if I assert, again today, that beyond differences, the positions of all the parties in our National Assembly continue, in the present context, to tend toward this same objective. Through hundreds of groups and associations, representing all the sectors of Quebec life (the most striking example being without doubt that of the "Estates General"), it is the same will which has expressed itself

so often in formulas of varying intensity but of the same inspiration going from "Particular Status" to "Associate States", while the governments went from "Masters in our own House" to "Equality or Independence".

This is the continuity which one shall find evoked in detail in the document which I have tabled. If any substantial part of these claims, concerning sharing of powers and the benefits of power, in particular those which have met with the unanimous approval of the provinces, finally became the object of a solid and concrete consensus around this table, we are not here to refuse it. There is nothing more legitimate in the present framework.

It does seem to us, however, that after so many negative years and with the feeling of urgency which, just recently, the Speech from the Throne pretended to reveal, not only is the ball in Ottawa's camp, but the return should be immediate. There is no question of again getting lost in those labyrinths which lead interminably from conferences to committees and from committees to conferences for, if such should be the case, we must express right now a skepticism solidly nurtured on past experience.

And one will readily understand that, no matter what happens, there is no question of giving up the important consultation of the

referendum, where Quebecers will, for the very first time in their history, have the opportunity of freely expressing themselves concerning their future. And until then, we shall not cease to propose this option of Sovereignty-Association which seems to us, the only truly modern and logical way of reorganizing essential relationships between us. Of course, between this solution and the reform of the status quo, there is a fundamental difference, a difference which would represent the acceleration but not at all a contradiction of the permanent course of our history and our aspirations. Even if, in the past, we did not dare or could not admit to ourselves that it would be its most normal result.

In a word, Sovereignty-Association is, we are sure, a legitimate expression of Quebec continuity and a less equivocal one than any other.

Openness

But this national affirmation would, on the other hand, not contain any desire to timidly shut ourselves off in a spirit of ethnocentrism or introversion. As Quebecers have become more self-assured, the internal continuity became interfaced with a growing willingness to be open to others and it is more apparent today than it ever was in the past. Quebecers are neither an aggressive nor a

vengeful people. Obviously, they hold fast, as any other people would, to defending their rights and interests and see to it that their government not neglect that duty. But if they wish to be respected by others, they are fully disposed to extend the same to all others and, most particularly, toward those of the rest of Canada with whom there have been established, over the years, relationships as numerous as they are varied.

Our government completely endorses this further aspect of the Quebec tradition because it is both positive and productive. We are and we want to remain open to those who surround us. If we ask our Quebec compatriots to approve the replacement of the federal system by another form of association among ourselves, it is precisely because we seek to reconcile that which appears to us of vital interest to the people of Quebec, with this other required continuity, that of Canada. When we shall have the mandate to speak of it again, officially, I ask you to believe that it will not be stubborn egoism nor a cramped and closed nationalism which will have led us to this point.

We are sufficiently realistic to know that a negative or narrow-minded attitude on our part or on the part of the rest of Canada would, in the short and the long term, be prejudicial to everyone without rendering the least service to anyone.

For this reason we shall, all of us in the years to come and starting today, have to free ourselves on both sides from convenient prejudices, over-simplifications as well as facile and superficial slogans. It seems to us that in Quebec we have been nurturing, since the very beginning of our collective memory, a profoundly legitimate objective - that of building for ourselves, without hurting others, an environment, institutions and means of action which can finally permit us to counter excessive dependence, in a word - to be masters in our own house. In the same way, however, we perfectly agree that our growth should in no way prevent our partners of the other provinces from developing as they see fit. Consequently, we are convinced that it will be possible, once the political future of Quebec has been determined, to co-operate together without bitterness and with mutual respect, better, perhaps, than we have ever succeeded up to the present time.

When one thinks of the future, there are so many possibilities which are open to Canadians and to Quebecers that we would be wrong, in the face of History, if we did not try together, while frankly recognizing our differences, to resolutely correct the present so that it cease, once and for all time, from sterilizing the promises of the future.