



CANADA

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PRIME MINISTER · PREMIER MINISTRE

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Ottawa K1A 0A2,
September 18th, 1978.

Dear Allan:

Several weeks have now passed since the Premiers Conference at Regina, and I have been giving a great deal of thought to the conclusions which the Premiers reached and to the atmosphere in which those conclusions were communicated to the people of Canada. On the conclusions themselves, while obviously there are differences in the positions which the provinces and the federal government have taken on a number of questions, there are also a great many points on which we are fundamentally agreed. Because of this, I see much hope that, over the coming months and years, the two levels of government will together be able to achieve important progress in the renewal of the Canadian Constitution.

The Honourable Allan Blakeney, Q.C.,
Premier of Saskatchewan,
Legislative Building,
Regina, Saskatchewan.

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In a separate and open letter of September 13th addressed to you, with copies to all the Premiers, I responded to your letter of August 22nd by which the conclusions of the Conference were brought to my attention. In that letter, however, I did not think it appropriate to deal with the question of "atmosphere" mentioned above and I am therefore writing this personal letter to you as Chairman of the Premiers Conference and, I believe, of interprovincial discussions in the coming year. I am not sending any copy or any similar letter to the other Premiers.

As you may imagine, my concerns about "atmosphere" go directly to the tone of the communiqués that were issued at the close of the Premiers Conference and to the many press reports which, rightly or wrongly, gave the clear impression of the provinces being ranged on one side, the federal government on the other, and an enormous gulf between them. A careful reading of the communiqués demonstrated that this was not the case, yet the impression given to the people of Canada was one of deep division, of an awesome absence of national unity.

I recognize that the approach of a federal election, almost by tradition, provides the justification for "attacks on Ottawa" and while I may deplore it personally as I face an election before long, I do not for an instant question the right of all Canadians, Premiers included, to roundly criticize the federal government. What happened at Regina, however, I cannot help but feel, went well beyond the normal bounds and, at a time of exceptional difficulty for Canada, gave the public impression that all provinces were opposed to everything that the national government has suggested as being fundamental to constitutional reform.

It is perfectly reasonable for the provinces to press for their own interests in constitutional changes, and the review process, obviously, has to provide for this. The appearance of wholesale rejection of federal proposals, however, cannot have helped but add to the feelings of helplessness and frustration that Canadians have felt for years at the inability of their governments to agree on anything. The appearance of a wide federal-provincial split, the impression that Canada has in some way or another already become a confederal state, the apparently remote chances of attaining agreement in future, could not have been better calculated to warm a separatist heart.

To make matters more difficult, a new element has been added in the provincial reaction to the proposal I made, in my letter to all Premiers on July 7th, that there should be a meeting of Ministers or of officials to prepare for our Conference on the Constitution. I suggested such a meeting for the last week of August. Such federal-provincial meetings have always been held on federal invitation and, except for special reasons, in the National Capital. The Premiers did not respond to my invitation but, rather, directed their Ministers responsible for constitutional work to hold a meeting on their own and to invite the federal Minister to come to it. The meeting was called for Montreal. Mr. Lalonde was invited to turn up, not for the whole meeting of September 25th-26th, but simply for the second day. He was not consulted in advance as to either date or place. Nor, in fact, was he told that there would be a first day to the meeting to which he was not being invited. We learned of this from other sources.

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We know now, from discussions between Mr. Lalonde and Mr. Romanow, just how this developed. However, the enthusiasm with which the arrangement was viewed in Quebec was made clear in comments by Mr. Claude Morin to the press which may have come to your notice. He made much of the fact that the invitation of Mr. Lalonde and me had been "rejected". Mr. Charron, for the Quebec government, said publicly that their whole posture at Regina had been a tactical one to serve the basic objectives of the P.Q. It is only reasonable to assume that that is so and that it will continue to be the case.

The federal government has had ample experience with tactical manoeuvres to serve separatist purposes, but happily until now, they have not been common in our relations with the provinces. They have been a regular part, however, in the games the separatists have played with us abroad, as on the occasion of "state visits" by the Premier of Quebec, with flags and protocol being exploited to create the impression that he is being recognized and received by foreign governments as the head of an independent state. The tactics are designed to embarrass Canada and its government in the eyes of foreign governments and to add stature to Quebec as a separate state. The risk now is that we will see the same game being played inside our country. If the other provinces are not aware of it, and if they agree to play this game, or if they initiate arrangements, as in the case of the Montreal meeting, that are consistent with such tactical ploys, the result can only be to depreciate our national government and to give the impression that Canada is a confederal system in which the federal government exists only to the extent that the provincial governments allow it to do so.

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I feel sure that the Premiers of provinces who want to see Canada remain one country will not knowingly play along with such tactics. The P.Q. government of Quebec has since Regina repeated that its clear objective is the separation of Quebec from Canada. Statements by Premier Lévesque during his recent visit to Hull reconfirm this fundamental goal - if reconfirmation were needed.

I recognize the difficult position of Premiers in trying to accommodate the presence of the Premier of a separatist government of Quebec in your meetings and conferences. The same problem pertains in the setting of federal-provincial conferences. I share your view that it is in the interest of Quebecers and of all Canadians that the elected government of Quebec play its full role as the government of a province of Canada. Quebec has much to contribute, to all of us, and its government, even though we disagree with it profoundly, should not be absent from our councils. At the same time, we have to remain on guard that our arrangements for federal-provincial consultation and debate, for working out solutions to problems for the benefit of all Canadians, and the great search for the renewal of our federation, do not become weakened and distorted by an exaggeration of our differences or by the tactics and the influence of those who would destroy the country.

I would welcome a chance to talk to you about this matter. It is one for which you and I may share a special responsibility in the crucial months ahead.

Sincerely,

