The Gazette - Montreal

PM, Bouchard bury hatchet for Francophonie summit

Friday, November 7, 1997   page: A13

From Montreal Gazette - FINAL EDITION

Premier Lucien Bouchard, who this week expressed satisfaction to be ``travelling as a Canadian" in China, should be equally happy when he reaches the summit of la Francophonie in Hanoi next week: he'll be seated at a desk clearly marked Canada-Quebec.

The meeting proves politics makes strange seatmates; in Bouchard's case, it will be Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

The two opposing heavyweight contenders in the battle over Quebec's future will spend next Friday through Sunday side by side, shoulder to shoulder, at the meeting of 49 countries.

At a background briefing yesterday, federal officials sought to discount speculation that Bouchard will use the conference to advance his cause of a sovereign Quebec - which he said he would during his recent visit to Paris.

A major separatist strategy is to lay the groundwork for Quebec to seek international recognition as a sovereign country after declaring independence unilaterally.

``From the Canadian perspective, we are not going to Hanoi for the purpose of fighting the Canadian battle," a federal official said yesterday.

``Canadian domestic issues, issues of separation, will not be the priority for the other 48 members there. They have enough problems of their own. They are not interested in any way in seeing the split-up of their individual countries. Their priorities are economic, networking, so it's not going to be a priority for them."

`Play by the rules'

Another official added: ``Clearly for us the Quebec government has no mandate to promote the political option of his party. ...We hope the Quebec government will play by the rules that have been established."

But those rules on who can speak on what subject are for the conference itself, not for the shmoozing opportunities in the corridors beyond the formal agenda.

``The mere presence of a Quebec premier who will have a direct access to all the heads of state ... constitutes in itself an aspect that won't be forgotten by anybody," Bouchard said in Paris.

``We are not going there to have a fight with Mr. Bouchard," the federal official insisted yesterday.

Federal and Quebec bureaucrats have thoroughly discussed all the major issues before the Nov. 14-16 conference, the officials said. ``There is agreement on all the main substantive issues - we are going off starting on the right foot."

The rules, as set out in an understanding between Ottawa and Quebec, include: ``The prime minister of Canada will confidentially inform the premier of Quebec in advance of the positions he intends to adopt on the various items of the agenda," according to a federal background document.

``On questions regarding the world political situation, the premier of Quebec will be present as an interested observer," it says. ``On questions regarding the world economic situation, the premier of Quebec will be able, following consultation and with the agreement of the prime minister of Canada, in a case-by-case basis, to intervene on matters of concern to Quebec."

Election of Secretary-General

Also attending will be New Brunswick's new premier, Ray Frenette. ``Premier Frenette and Premier Bouchard are there as part of the general Canadian delegation. ... It is Canada alone which talks on the general political issues, not the premiers," the official said.

The election of a full-time secretary-general by the conference - the seventh summit since the organization's founding 11 years ago - is the major item on the agenda. The front-runner is former United Nations secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt.

``We will have a secretary-general and la Francophonie will become more political, more visible and more involved at the international level," one official said yesterday. ``He has a great deal of moral authority as well. He will be an arbitrator, a mediator (with) great credibility, great visibility, very high profile."

The conference will also try to set new standards on human rights. ``Let's talk straight: when you sit