

Lesage on Confederation

(C.U.P.) — Moved by a deep historical sense, many Canadians are now making efforts to come to grips honestly, frankly, and realistically with the great issues that are to determine the character of Canada tomorrow. I will not expect, therefore, that what I say today will find agreement everywhere or that everything I say shall have the same general reception. But, I hope that my endeavour to state the position of Canadian federalism at this time, and to mark out the tendencies suggestive of its future, will be taken for what such statements really are, namely, a serious, determined effort by myself to share fully the responsibility in the present Canadian dialogue, where we are all participants whether we like it or not.

To me, the primary historical lesson of Confederation, at its founding, was the serious and frank effort to embrace two peoples within a common system of federal government, which implied both a common program and a large measure of provincial autonomy for those vital concerns for which that autonomy was indispensable.

What happened to this political understanding implicit in 1867? In a way, there was from the beginning both success and difficulty. Whatever the strength and weaknesses of the British North America Act, it was clear that it spoke the difficult and necessary language of compromise: a strong federal government was to be balanced by effective provincial authority.

But regional or provincial government in 1867 was not yet by itself a powerful instrument. Weak bureaucracies, limited financial resources, modest education and welfare programs, little or no economic intervention in the modern sense — all of these were characteristic of Quebec and other provinces.

However, no provincial administration has ever accepted to be considered as a subordinate instrument of the central government, and Canadian public opinion has always been strongly opposed to any federal action which could have been permanently destructive of genuine provincial autonomy. This basic resistance to federal claims to supremacy, combined with the judicial interpretations of our constitution, has firmly established the equality of status of the federal and provincial governments and the integrity of their respective powers.

Then came two great experiences which again altered the political and constitutional balance of our Canadian existence: the great depression of the 1930's followed and terminated by the war and post-war "forties and fifties". Both periods invited vast programs of federal action. The provinces were unable to cope with unemployment and the federal government had to take on many burdens in fields which were of provincial jurisdiction.

Because it commanded the total resources of the nation, the last was required a high-centralized system of government and a very superior bureaucracy that carried its concepts far into the post-war period in the management of a few years after the war, we find that the federal apparatus, the federal interest in local activities had approached proportions that could have indefinitely increased the scope of federal administrative action.

It was then that new economic and political realities emerged to challenge this long-term trend in the growth of federal power. Those realities had to do with certain unforeseen developments in the Canadian economy, in the organization of the provinces'

political life, in the changing welfare demands of the people and, above all, they had to do with fundamental social pressures and changes in Quebec itself.

On the general economic side, what was happening in Canada was the fascinating — if disturbing — experience whereby affluence with unemployment, rapid development with regional poverty seemed to be becoming a fixed model for our land. Regrettably, a very large part of that poverty and of that unemployment happened to be in the Province of Quebec and in the Atlantic Provinces. Natural economic policy, monetary and fiscal policy, were themselves unable apparently to make a major "final" assault on unemployment and regional underdevelopment.

At the same time, certain significant provincial needs began to appear everywhere. The population changes in Canada, the new technology and automation, all together demanded of provincial and municipal governments a radically new approach to education and training. And, while it was true that some financial support was coming from federal sources, the main burdens had to be borne by the provinces. Moreover, to this educational and population challenge were added the problems of rural development and those of urban expansion.

But now let me turn to the evidence that Quebec, thought it may opt out of "joint programs", is not opting out of Canada — whatever may be believed by the uninformed and the timorous. If there is

debate over fiscal and monetary policy, if there are reservations about the size and cost of military expenditures by the federal government, such issues are not raised to intrude upon the present federal jurisdiction, but they aim at opening the door to a new technique of discussion which so far our federalism has not provided for except through the mechanism of political representation at the federal level itself.

The old "Bruns" has fumbled.

Lesage can't Next Week

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