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Quebec's challenge a chance to improve national unity

The following passages are from an address by the Prime Minister to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters in Winnipeg, April 18:

Since November 15, Canada has been living through the greatest challenge to its nationhood since Confederation. The challenge involves great dangers, but also great hopes. For Quebecers, but for other Canadians as well.

In the province of Quebec, the victory of the Parti Quebecois has directly activated a grave danger of the separation and fracturing of Canada - which I totally oppose and will vigorously fight. But it has also created great hopes among Quebecers - for more fulfillment and freedom of expression as a French-speaking community; for social change and reform; for greater democracy and better government in the province. These are all goals which I share and will support.

In Canada as a whole, the dangers and hopes have come more slowly into focus, but are no less immense.

Seriousness of situation

Perhaps the first danger would be to underestimate the seriousness of the situation in Quebec, the determination of the PQ government. Paradoxically, because the Quebec situation is so serious, Canadians and their Federal Government cannot afford to become morbidly preoccupied with separatism, dealing with that situation alone.

On the contrary. The separatist danger in Quebec requires us, in fact, to continue working as hard as possible to reduce unemployment and improve the economy; to provide better management in government; to meet the aspirations of Western Canadians; to do many other things.

There are two important reasons for this. First, if Quebecers in their referendum are to choose to live in Canada, it will have to be a Canada they want to live in, which depends in part on a whole range of national policies and programs. Second, unless all Canadians are reasonably happy with their lot, problems of national unity may erupt again and again in region after region.

Hence our policies for dealing with the situation in Quebec must be fair and equitable for all Canadians. But our policies must do more than that. And here is where I see great hope, great opportunity for the entire country arising from this challenge to national unity.

If our policies are to be successful, they must treat this challenge as an opportunity to improve Confederation for all Canadians....

Priorities for unity

I will be speaking to Canadians on future occasions about changes in our policies, and possibly in our Constitution, that may be required to ensure the unity of the country. Tonight, however, I wish to speak about the need for change, for accommodation, not in laws but in attitudes. After all, our attitudes toward each other will fundamentally determine what changes we want to make in our policies and laws, and even in the form of our Constitution - and not the other way around. It is our attitudes toward each other which will ultimately determine whether and how we want to stay together as Canadians. That is why healthier attitudes, greater understanding, are the first priority for unity....

Chance to build better Canada

Far from being a reason for Westerners to feel dismay that now their problems' will be neglected, November 15 provides a reason for them to feel greater hope that they will be solved. This is because the Quebec election has opened the door wider to change. It has created an opportunity, a nationally-felt imperative to build a better Canada - and the Federal Government knows that this cannot be done unless the needs and aspirations of Western Canadians are met, as well as the needs and aspirations of Canadians living in the Atlantic provinces, and everywhere else.

In time, a national consensus may

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