

French summit Quebec's 'lifeline to the world'

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QUEBEC

It took more than a year, but the "beau risque" finally looks like it is paying off here. Late in February, Canada will have a new voice in international affairs — a strong French voice — and Quebec will have its lifeline to the world.

Thirty-three French-speaking nations meet in Paris Feb. 17-19 to discuss their future in a world that poses a constant threat to their language and culture.

It's not exactly the pavoff former premier René Lévesque was looking for when Pierre Trudeau's retirement, the federal Liberal defeat and the election of Brian Mulroney's Conservatives com-

bined to convince him that it was time to give federalism another chance.

Despite the ensuing casualties, the Parti Québécois' tentative embrace of federalism did allow Quebec and the federal government to forget more than 15 years of bickering and, on Nov. 8, sign an agreement that cleared the way for the first summit of francophone nations.

The 20-year-old dream of presidents Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, the summit has been held up for years by Quebec's penchant for flying solo whenever it got near the world stage.

However, the Ottawa-Quebec agreement settled the problem by clearly spelling out that the federal government will speak for Canada on world affairs at the meeting, but Quebec will have its own voice in economic and cultural matters that affect it directly.

As a result of a separate agreement with the feds, New Brunswick's 255,000 francophones will enjoy the same status as Quebec at the summit, a move PQ Leader Pierre Marc Johnson sees as a "betrayal" that diminishes the importance of Quebec.

Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa says he doesn't have any problems with New Brunswick's presence or role, and Premier Richard Hatfield says he will gladly attend.

For Canada, the "Francophonie" will provide a forum that is potentially as

important as the Commonwealth. As one of the leading nations attending, Canada will be able to broaden its commitment to North-South problems and take a fresh look at how the industrialized world can help developing nations.

For Quebec, particularly, the benefits promise to be much less idealistic, but still important.

Bourassa will be looking at the 150-million-strong French-speaking market when he talks about co-operation in the areas of book publishing, television production and telecommunications.

It will be the first giant step for a Quebec that is emerging from nine stifling years of nationalistic navel-gazing, and it is being greeted here as "historic."

The only sour note comes with the realization that Quebec is preparing to offer the francophone world the friendly hand it hasn't yet extended at home.

According to the 1981 census, there are 940,000 Canadians living outside

Quebec whose mother tongue is French. Since the advent of the PQ, they have been more or less on their own, treated by the Quebec government as if they were lesser francophones because they lived outside the province.

This narrow, chauvinistic attitude was evident in the cold shoulder Quebec turned to franco-Manitobans in their hour of need and it was underlined two weeks ago when an out-of-sorts Johnson complained about New Brunswick francophones getting the same treatment as Quebec at the summit.

Quebec's new Liberal government is willing, indeed anxious, to open North America's only French-speaking homeland to the world, however it hasn't yet made clear its intentions toward its Canadian neighbors.

In North Bay and the Sault, St. Boniface and Edmunston, francophone communities would likely settle for the same treatment as Gabon, Tunisia and Senegal — just this once.