

*The Address*

Quebec sovereignty is no longer a mere matter of the heart or patriotism. It has become a matter of practicality.

• (1035)

Following the constitutional negotiations of recent years, sovereignty has emerged as the only way to allow our two nations to stop arguing endlessly about the Constitution and start dealing with the real issues.

What are those real issues? First, to undo the harm done by overly liberal budgeting in recent years, especially at the federal level. Second, to promote economic development and competitiveness. Third, to create lasting employment. And fourth, to really tackle the problem of growing poverty in Quebec and Canada.

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that a beneficial restructuring of the relations between Quebec and Canada did occur, such that we would end up with two sovereign countries. Their relations would then be free of any constitutional dispute and a common economic space would be maintained out of mutual interest, not as a favour, as the other side usually says.

That is what the sovereignty plan is all about. It is directed against no one, especially not our Canadians friends. Our plan has a resolutely global reach. It is legitimate, progressive, open and totally in tune with the times.

Until the people of Quebec decide democratically to take their destiny into their own hands, the Bloc Québécois has received from them the mandate to protect their interests. And whether you like it or not, the Canadian democratic process has given us the role of official opposition in this chamber of Parliament.

As my leader has repeatedly said, the Bloc Québécois will assume the role of Official Opposition with all the fervour we have come to expect from it, especially in the last four days, because the fight against poverty and unemployment, for example, is universal. Whether you are a federalist or a sovereignist, you must fight these evils.

Equity also has a universal definition and the Bloc Québécois will act on the basis of this concern for fairness. For Quebec first of all, because the inequity in federal spending is most flagrant in its case, and elsewhere if required.

Mr. Speaker, you will understand that, as the Official Opposition, we will often be working towards the Bloc Québécois's ultimate goal, which is to pave the way for sovereignty for Quebec.

Where public finances are concerned, no one in Quebec or Canada has any interest in seeing the already catastrophic state of the federal government's finances deteriorate further. Canada and a sovereign Quebec will have to assume their share of the federal debt.

The same goes for international trade. It is definitely in Quebec's interest, beginning with Quebec's duly elected representatives in the Bloc Québécois, to ensure that the international agreements recently concluded in its name are beneficial. Under the rule for successor states, a sovereign Quebec would inherit the commitments already made by Canada.

So in these two specific areas, public finances and international trade, we have seen recently that both Quebecers and Canadians really need a vigorous official opposition.

Quebecers and Canadians need a strong opposition because the federal government, the present Liberal government, intends to solve the Canadian government's financial problem using the same approach that it criticized the previous government for, namely putting the burden of fiscal reform on the poorest members of our society. As my leader said, that is unacceptable.

Modernizing and restructuring the social security system as suggested in the speech from the throne, knowing that this reform comes from the same senior civil servants, these great mandarins, one of whom has now become the new member for Hull—Aylmer, these great mandarins praised to the skies by this government, such a reform simply means cutting social programs.

We see the same sinister intent in a publication on Canada's economic challenges issued last week by the Minister of Finance. What do we find in this new bible of the federal mandarins? We read that Canada spends more on social assistance than its major trading partners. It says that our unemployment insurance system is more generous than average and creates major disincentives to work. Major disincentives to work—I find that downright odious.

• (1040)

This is despicable because, as the Leader of the Official Opposition said two days ago, nobody goes to the unemployment office for the fun of it. Nobody in Quebec, as in the rest of Canada, is proud to be unemployed or on welfare. And everybody wants to enjoy the fundamental right to work. When I read this document and the recent statements made by our friends across the floor, I get the impression that I am reading old stuff written a century ago by ultraconservative economists.

This document from the Department of Finance also mentions that our public expenditures related to health care are higher than others, without noticeable results. I was flabbergasted to see this kind of statement in the Department of Finance's document, because those are precisely the people who, not long ago, were saying that our health care system was the best and the cheapest in the world. Now they are contradicting themselves and, because they want to please some ultraconservative economists met recently at a seminar, they are prepared to make cuts to health care programs.