

The Constitution

What those opposing such entrenchment apparently fail to grasp is that very much more is at stake here than just the sense of identity and dignity of one of this country's two founding peoples. Quite clearly the corollary is that Canada's continued unity itself depends on successful inculcation of this vital sense of belonging. For despite the smokescreens created by the raising of economic and other issues over the recent decades of acute Quebec unrest, the language question is and has been at the heart of the issue.

● (1700)

It has become a truism to point out that, through use of its two official languages both at home and abroad, Canada has managed to maintain a measure of distinctness vis-à-vis the all-pervasive culture of the United States. But if Canada as a whole oft-times fears drowning in this American tidal wave, just imagine the apprehensions of Quebec and our four million unilingual French-speaking fellow Canadians who live there, surrounded by an English language ocean of more than 250 million—the most powerful, technologically advanced and wealthiest society in the world. Just try to envisage the fears, trepidations and uncertainties of the French-speaking Quebecer, and how these fears are increased a hundredfold for his counterpart outside his home province.

Thus there is no doubt in my mind that the language issue has always been, and remains, at the root of any Quebec independence movement, and the continued discrimination against French-speaking minorities in other parts of this land constitutes a major force for national disunity.

I feel, Mr. Speaker, that I must make the point here that French-speaking Canadians no longer believe that this is any particular person's fault. They realize that there is no devious Anglo-Saxon plot to eliminate their language.

An hon. Member: There never was.

Mr. Desmarais: The threat stems from a historical and geopolitical accident of circumstances, not necessarily from any ill will in the hearts of their English language compatriots or American neighbours. But this realization does nothing to make the danger any less real. And what thinking Quebecers fear most of all is the nightmare possibility that mere force of geographic and economic circumstances could lead to a gradual degeneration of their language to a folkloric level. They are now aware of instances elsewhere in the world where a language, culture and an entire people have slipped into a sort of twilight zone, providing a curiosity for tourists who come to see the natives "who talk funny".

Again, the modern day science of linguistics has made it abundantly clear that the very quality of our individual thought processes depends directly on the quality and precision of the language we use. All abstract concepts—for example, honour, courage, justice, equity and even love—are intangibles, impalpable ideas which exist only through words and their employment in our syntax. Thus it follows that if this precision is blunted, if this syntax is distorted through deterioration of language, the thought processes themselves inevitably

degenerate. And we end up with something less than a full human being.

Now I am not, of course, suggesting, Mr. Speaker, that mere constitutional entrenchment of language rights will solve this problem, any more than will Quebec's Bill-101. I have made the point rather as a form of appeal to those opposed to such entrenchment to endeavour to look at the situation from another person's point of view.

It is, in essence, an appeal—perhaps I should even say a heartfelt plea—for realization that French-speaking Canadians are desperately in need of understanding and support from their English language fellow citizens. And this need, though often concealed beneath truculence and aggressiveness, is as poignantly real today as at any time in our country's history. From one Canadian to another it is, in fact, a cry for help.

In light of the foregoing, it is difficult to comprehend the opposition to the government's proposal for a truly Canadian Constitution. At the Victoria conference of 1970, it should be recalled, all provinces agreed to the principle of entrenchment of political rights in a new Constitution. At the 1977 New Brunswick premiers' conference, all provincial government heads again pledged to set up machinery to ensure access to minority language education facilities across the country, where warranted by sufficient population. This principle was ratified at subsequent premiers' meetings in Montreal and has since, apparently, remained an avowed goal.

At the same time, Premier Lévesque offered his provincial counterparts a formula for reciprocity covering minority language education rights. Now that such reciprocity is, in essence, being proposed in a constitutional charter which would be beyond the whims of any transitory majority, it is difficult indeed to see how the present Quebec government could find credible grounds for objection; nor are there, as far as I can determine, Mr. Speaker, any serious objections to the principle of placing wealth sharing, through equalization, beyond any such transitory tampering.

Thus we are forced to the conclusion that, with a majority of Canadians in favour of bringing home the Constitution, of the principle of entrenchment of basic rights, including language mobility and equalization, opposition is aimed at form rather than substance. Therefore, with your permission, Mr. Speaker, I will attempt to deal with this aspect in the concluding portion of my remarks today.

[*Translation*]

Now, examination of the substance of such opposition, in addition to the representations heard by our parliamentary committee, makes it clear that even most hon. members across the floor here are in favour of the thrust of the government's proposals. And this, in turn, places responsibility for any move to block our Constitution squarely on the shoulders of dissenting provincial governments. But in this respect I would like to make one pertinent observation. This is that, at the time when the Quebec sovereignty-association referendum campaign was in full swing, all other provincial premiers—some through their very silence—quite clearly indicated tacit consent to the