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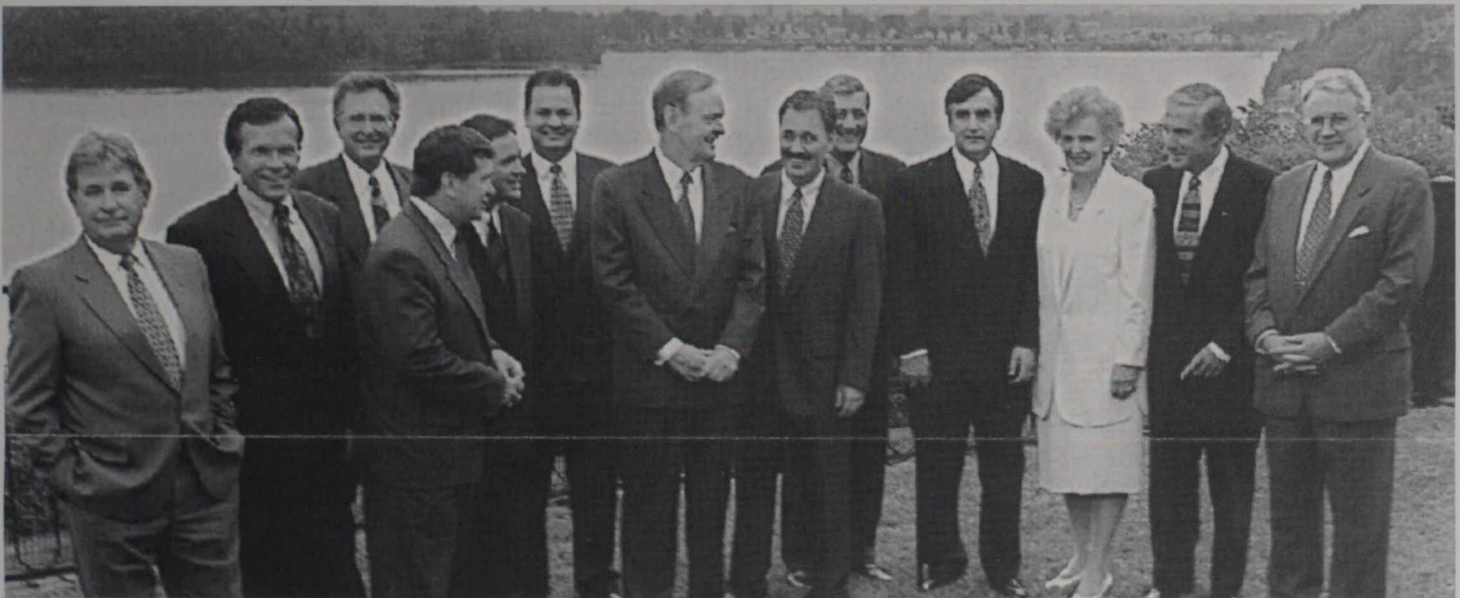
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Dept of External Affairs
Min. des Affaires extérieures

CANADA QUARTERLY

July 1996

Volume 4 Number 3

COOPERATION THE FOCUS OF FIRST
MINISTERS' MEETING

Canapress Photo/Fred Chartrand

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien with provincial and territorial leaders in front of the Ottawa River before their dinner meeting on June 20. Left to right: Alberta Premier Ralph Klein, Manitoba Premier Gary Filmon, Yukon leader John Ostashek, New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna, Newfoundland Premier Brian Tobin, N.W.T. leader Don Morin, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, B.C. Premier Glen Clark, Ontario Premier Mike Harris, Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard, Prince Edward Island Premier Catherine Callbeck, Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow, and Nova Scotia Premier John Savage.

At a meeting held in Ottawa on June 20 and 21, the Prime Minister and provincial and territorial leaders agreed to collaborate on harmonizing environmental standards, organizing a high-level trade mission to the Far East, accelerating the removal of barriers to internal trade, and creating a national child benefit package.

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien said: "It was a very good meeting...with concrete results," and Newfoundland Premier Brian Tobin agreed: "I'm going away feeling that there is still a strong desire to have an effective national government and a strong desire to live and work together." Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard said, despite the existence of what he called "two different visions" of the country: "I don't think it's a waste of time... I note... obvious good will on the part of all around the table. We share the same concerns."

Such meetings of the "First Ministers," as they are known, play a crucial role in the Canadian federal system. Because of the extensive overlap of governmental responsibilities and the necessity for joint funding in most areas of public policy, the efficient functioning of the federation depends upon federal-provincial cooperation at all levels. The most visible mechanism for managing intergovernmental relations is the First Ministers' Conference, chaired by the Prime Minister. It has no regular schedule of meetings and is convened by the Prime Minister as issues arise.

A major theme of this year's conference was clarifying the responsibilities of the two orders of government to reflect the country's changing needs and resources. In a speech delivered on June 18, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien outlined his government's approach to modernizing the federation: "We have

been through two failed constitutional attempts in the last 10 years. In each case, large, complex, all-or-nothing packages were put on the table. In each case, good intentions ended in failure.... If we have learned anything from these experiences, it is that a different approach is needed, a more step-by-step, pragmatic approach. Identifying a problem, getting agreement and solving it. Then moving on to the next problem."

One element of this approach is the federal plan to withdraw from several areas of provincial jurisdiction—labour market training, mining, forestry, recreation, and administration of social (public) housing. The federal government has also announced it will not use its constitutional spending power to create new shared-cost programs in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction without the consent of a majority of

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