

May I say first of all that I am delighted by your interest in the political life of contemporary Canada and Quebec. It is a Quebecer who is speaking to you, and one who cannot help but measure the progress made in France-Canada and France-Quebec relations since his first stay in Paris at the end of the Second World War. I will merely note that if the events that are gathering us together here today had taken place back then, they would have passed completely unnoticed by France. Not only because the French had many other concerns at that time, but chiefly because of our mutual ignorance on both sides of the Atlantic. Now, thank God, thanks to air travel, telecommunications, closer interpersonal and intergovernmental relations, and primarily to your sympathy and renewed sense of cultural solidarity, we are moving closer, and astounding progress in this direction can be seen daily.

And so, the news of a referendum in Quebec does not leave you indifferent, and your friendly curiosity honours and heartens us. You are expecting me to make a presentation which attempts to measure the importance of this event to Quebec and to Canada, and which also reflects the attitude of the Canadian Government, as the recent presentation of my colleague Yves Michaud, Delegate General of Quebec, reflected the thought and approach of the Quebec Government. Of course my remarks will differ substantially from his. But I will try hard to leave any partisan spirit out of it. We do not want to broadcast our domestic quarrels here in Paris; our aim is to inform, as honestly as possible, our friends who wish to understand what is happening in a country that is not just an ally but a member of the family -- or so it perceives itself.

To understand the situation, we must first and foremost avoid what I would call catastrophism. The threats to Canadian unity and the cultural anguish felt by numerous Quebecers are very real facts, which I will not describe anew. The referendum in Quebec on sovereignty-association is a political event the importance of which I will certainly not try to underestimate. The democratically-elected government of a Canadian province, the largest in area and the second largest in population within our Federation, is proposing to its citizens a constitutional formula which would lead to secession, combined with a common market and a monetary union. Clearly this is no small event.