

# Hatfield at King's Constitution-reform urged

by Greg Morgan

Last Thursday night, Premier Richard Hatfield of New Brunswick spoke on the Canadian constitution for three hours, to a small audience at King's College. He believes that a reformed constitution protecting language and human rights and providing for permanent measures to alleviate regional disparity should be a top priority for politicians.

Hatfield condemned Rene Levesque's proposed referendum as a "gimmick and damaging to the PQ's integrity. Because cowardly politicians use it as a device to avoid responsibility for their decisions, he said, the very concept of the referendum was inherently unsound. At any rate, difficulties surrounding the definition of the second word make the term "sovereignty-association" excessively vague. The premier perceives a split in the Quebec electo-rate between a "heavy" vote for "yes" on the referendum, made up of well-established Franco-phones, and a "soft" vote including English Quebecers and southern European immigrants. He wondered whether the PQ could win enough of the heavy vote to achieve its ends.

Declining pequisite fortunes make Hatfield optimistic about Canada. Comparing the current state of the party with what he called its "brilliant" performance in the 1971 campaign against Bourassa, he said both the quality of leadership and the party organization had suffered since the 1976 victory. The three by-elections lost by the PQ last Wednesday evidence a growing disaffection with the party.

The premier had nothing but praise for Quebec opposition leader Claude Ryan, and claimed to be even more impressed by the man's federalism now, than he had been five years ago. When he was editor of *Le Devoir*, Ryan always supported "special status" for Quebec. It seems he has introduced a couple of novel ideas into the provincial Liberal Party—the leader campaigns in person on the street and has attempted to

ensure a fair and democratic process of selecting Liberal candidates. Hatfield attributed a "clear understanding of what Quebec wants" to Ryan and expressed confidence that he prove a hard bargainer.

He seemed equally optimistic as he turned to New Brunswick's own Franco-phones, and the cultural difference which separates them from the turmoil in Quebec. The Acadians tend to reject the more political and militant authors and chansonniers of the neighbouring province in favour of home-grown artists like Angele Arsenault. While the Acadian movement is reported to be "stronger and more confident", the corresponding political party is weak. One relevant statistic shows half the Acadians would like their own province, but Hatfield said this must be considered with another which says 80% of them don't think the "ideal state" could ever be achieved. He later qualified that qualification. It appears that if Quebec separated, many Acadians would emigrate in order to secure an absolutely inviolable right to speak their language.

Hatfield wants entrenched language rights for at the least the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick. A few provinces with special interests will press vigorously for protection when they begin to meet for serious negotiations. Alberta, he said, will demand rights to tax resources similar to those promised to Newfoundland. Saskatchewan may come looking for complete provincial control over communications, the better to shield New Democrat governments from the possibility of federal propaganda. All this implies a few clauses applied to specific provinces to the exclusion of others.

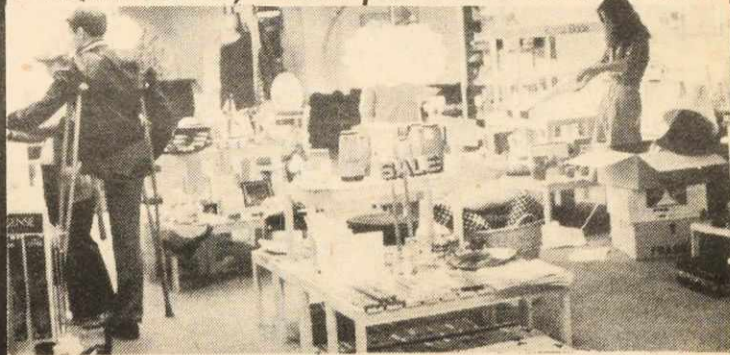
His stance on the constitution is generally conservative and flatters the existing document. Keep the Senate in order to retain the best of all extant political systems. Do not copy other nations, and that includes the US: America must soon face either

"chaos", or "substantial reform". Canada can make all the necessary adjustments without tampering with the present distribution of powers between the two levels of government. He supports Ottawa's claim to dominance in the areas of fiscal and monetary policy. Furthermore, the conferences should not try to contrive constitutional machinery for preventing future Heritage Funds or for removing a portion of a province's surplus wealth. He trusts the people of rich provinces not to let their local governments amass excessive fortunes. Hatfield associates national unity with a single national level of social services. That the quality of health, welfare, and educational services available here differs little from that enjoyed in Ontario seems to have some bearing on the Canadian identity.

He labelled Clark's vow not to negotiate with Quebec should it wish to secede "bad politics". In fact, the hypothetical question it answered was never asked in the first place. However, Clark's policies demonstrate a respect for the legitimacy of provincial powers that was unheard of under Trudeau. The federal civil service doesn't like it, but it may go some distance towards compensating for Conservative weakness in Quebec. Hatfield accused federal-provincial conflict of stirring up bitterness which served PQ interests very nicely.

The premier attaches great importance to constitutional reform. According to him, work began in 1968 but was halted after the 1971 Victoria Conference because it wasn't a political issue. Since Levesque's triumph, however, the Continuing Committee on Constitutional Reform has met several times. Had affairs been settled five years ago, Canada would have no oil problems and less unemployment today. Unless discussion continues for the next ten years or so, he predicted, the country will remain in its shameful semi-colonial state, and one day an insulted electorate will rise up and do something ill-considered.

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