

"Yes" vote won't end Canada — "no" vote won't end problem

The following is the text of a speech by Canada's Ambassador to France Gérard Pelletier at a luncheon organized by the Groupe Sénatorial d'Amitié France-Canada in Paris on May 7. Leaving partisan spirit aside, Mr. Pelletier said he wanted to inform his audience, as honestly as possible, about the situation in Canada. Although his speech seeks to provide greater insight into the Quebec referendum, it also considers the position of Quebec within the Canadian confederation and for this reason will be of interest even though the results of the referendum are known.

...To understand the situation [in Quebec], 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.

However, with this said, the referendum cannot bring any concrete change in the immediate future. Even a resounding "yes" on May 20 would not bring about either the breakup of the Canadian confederation or the emergence of an independent Quebec. Canada would still be there the morning of the 21st, and for a number of years afterward. Nor would a resounding "no" settle anything immediately, since it would still be necessary to sit down at the negotiating table to correct certain shortcomings in the Canadian constitution and adapt our institutions to new situations which arose in the middle of the century. As a former Prime Minister said: a victory of the "yes" vote would not mean the end of Canada; a victory of the "no" would not mean the end of the problem.

And this is how the very people who are holding the referendum would have it. The question being put to the people of Quebec asks them to give their provincial government a mandate to negotiate with the rest of Canada, nothing more. The preamble to the question even stipulates that no change will be made to the current political institutions before a second referendum has been held on the nature of such future changes.

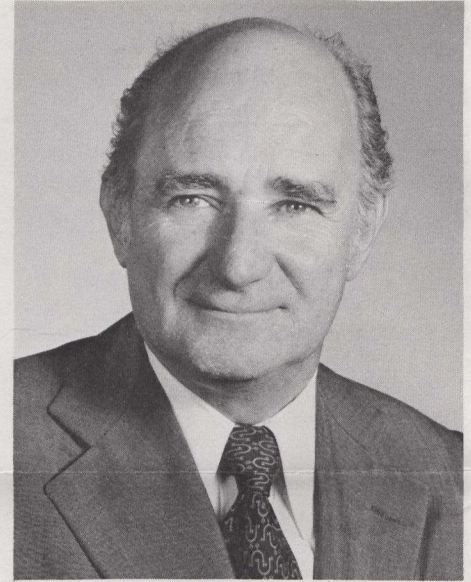
It is therefore clear that the referendum of May 20 is just one step in a long process of which the result, whatever it may be, will not be seen for a long time yet. For the implementation of its secessionist project, the current government of Quebec has chosen a strategy which could be termed "one step at a time".

Political factors

It is interesting to examine the political factors behind this choice. The traditional proponents of sovereignty, throughout world history, have called for more haste, even precipitateness. What, then, has inspired so much restraint and caution?

First, and entirely to their credit, is a clear concern for working democratically. They do not want to force on Quebecers a sovereignty the people do not want. On the other hand, and this is to the credit of their federalist adversaries, the secessionist proposal has never been laid under an interdict. It is perfectly legal in Canada to promote democratically the sovereignty-association set forth by the Parti Québécois, and the only weapons used by those who reject it are those of persuasion. Under these conditions, it is understandable that the Quebec secessionists have opted for a strategy that involves a number of gradual steps in the pursuit of their objective....

If the aim were to break the chains of a people in slavery, victims of a dictatorship, prey to an arbitrary and oppressive system, it would be hard to understand why its liberators were not more impatient. And certainly, the rhetoric of certain Quebec nationalists could lead one to believe that this was exactly the situation. "Slow genocide", "colonialist spoliation", threats to the survival of French-speaking people and many other things have been mentioned. But this was all, as I have said, so much rhetoric. The Quebec Government's White Paper, which started off the referendum campaign, and which is the official manifesto of the



Ambassador Gérard Pelletier

secessionists, deals swift justice on these lyrical exaggerations. Here is how the White Paper describes contemporary Quebec:

"We are a young and educated people. In less than a generation, we have completely transformed our educational system; among the least educated 20 years ago, we are now in the front ranks of the industrialized countries. Today, our colleges and universities produce graduates by the thousands.

"Our work force is competent and efficient. Various studies have shown that the Quebec worker is often prouder and more industrious than other North Americans.

"In science and technology, Quebec has made giant strides thanks to its laboratories and research centres, and many of our consulting engineering firms excel in their field; three of the top ten such firms in the entire world are Quebec enterprises!

"In the past few years, the dynamic progress of our regions and the birth of many new enterprises has given the lie to the old cliché about Quebecers' lack of entrepreneurship; increasingly, our firms have been joining forces so as to make a better contribution to the expansion of our economy.

"Quebecers are well known, too, for their inclination to save, and thanks to their savings, they now have a significant supply of capital; the extraordinary success of our credit and savings co-operatives, as well as our insurance companies, provides eloquent proof of that. The *Caisses populaires Desjardins* (Desjardins credit unions) and the *Caisses d'économie* (savings unions) have more than four million members, and assets of more than