

Simmering 'microphone war' has Paris edgy

French fear outbreak of new rivalry between Ottawa and Quebec at francophone summit

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QUEBEC — Anybody who thought tensions between Quebec City and Ottawa would disappear along with the former Parti Québécois government must have been surprised by the outbreak of the War of the Microphone.

Those two good friends, Prime Minister Mulroney and Premier Bourassa, have found themselves involved in an unseemly little tussle over the microphone at the opening session of the historic first summit conference of French-speaking governments in Paris next month.

Each wants to speak at the session; it would look good on television to the folks back home. Mulroney, especially, could use the coverage. Public-opinion survey results published yesterday indicate that, here in Quebec, support for Mulroney's Conservative party has plummeted 25 percentage points since last June, putting the Tories far below the Liberals, 23 points to 54.

Time for only one

But it looks increasingly as though there will be time for only one of the three Canadian heads of government participating in the conference — New Brunswick Premier Richard Hatfield is the third — to speak. That would be Mulroney, on the reasonable ground that he's the head of a national government. Bourassa would have to wait until the closing session, if he gets to address the conference in public at all. And while the newly-elected premier doesn't have Mulroney's political problems, the enhanced prestige he'd get from exposure at the conference certainly wouldn't do him any harm.

The War of the Microphone broke out a little more than a week ago, when it was reported that Ot-

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tawa was trying to persuade the other participants in the conference to have a relatively brief opening session, which would leave Bourassa no time to speak. Both Ottawa and Quebec City denied there was any dispute between them.

But in an interview a week ago with *Le Devoir*, Mulroney said it had been decided that only a relatively small number of heads of national governments, including himself, would speak at the opening session. Quebec spokesmen insisted that the format for the opening session hadn't yet been agreed upon, and that the session might be long enough to allow several heads of government, including Bourassa, to speak.

But by Wednesday, Bourassa had come up with a compromise position. He said he wouldn't mind not speaking at the opening session of the conference if he could address the closing session, which would also be public. His speech would be justified by an invitation to the heads of government to hold their next summit conference in Quebec City, probably in two years.

Quebec political journalists have been whipping themselves into a frenzy over this little squabble. This is, after all, a slow period in Quebec politics. And the War of

the Microphone is reminiscent of the "Wars of the Flags" between Ottawa and Quebec in the late 1960s over Quebec's status at international meetings of French-speaking governments.

This isn't the first controversy to have arisen over Quebec's participation in the conference. Former premier Pierre Marc Johnson accused Mulroney of "betraying" Quebec by agreeing that New Brunswick, 33 per cent of whose population speaks French, would have the same status at the conference as Quebec, the population of which is 83 per cent French-speaking.

Are a little touchy

And the War of the Microphone isn't the only indication that relations between Quebec and Ottawa are a little touchy these days. Bourassa is said to be miffed that the news of the appointment of Jean-Louis Roy, the outgoing publisher of *Le Devoir*, as Quebec's new delegate-general to Paris, was apparently leaked by the External Affairs Department in Ottawa before the Quebec premier could even inform his own cabinet.

But publicly, Bourassa has tried to play down the significance of the War of the Microphone. He realizes that Quebecers aren't exactly arguing among themselves on the buses over whether he should get his moment in the spotlight at the start of an international conference in Paris.

He's also aware that, since the referendum, people here have wanted their two governments to get along with each other. And he's been getting good feedback from out in the province about his announced intention to "put the Canadian flag back in the National As-