



CANADA

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 68/4

A TIME FOR CRUCIAL DECISIONS

Statement by Prime Minister L.B. Pearson at
the Opening in Ottawa of the Constitutional
Conference on February 5, 1968

There are times in the life of a country when the assurance of good intentions, the discharge of normal duty and acceptance of routine responsibility, are not enough. What such times demand is the exercise of courage and decision that go far beyond the needs of the moment. I believe that this is such a time for Canada. Here the road forks. If we have the resolution and the wisdom to choose the right new course and to follow it steadfastly, I can see few limits to what we may achieve together as a people. But, if we lack the courage to choose or if we choose wrongly, we shall leave to our children, and our children's children a country in fragments, and we ourselves shall have become the failures of Confederation.

Today forces of change are abroad in the world. They are wiping out old landmarks and are making some old traditions seem hardly relevant. I am not wise enough (perhaps no one is wise enough) to know all the causes of these movements of change or to define their direction or their ultimate outcome. But no one can be unaware of their presence on their power. They are to be seen at work within most of our own institutions. They are having a deep, and, at times, a disconcerting, effect on the hopes of the young and on their relation to society. They are leading to a wide search for new patterns of self-fulfilment - a search which governments should encourage and direct so that it can meet new conditions and new aspirations.

These forces of change are having their effect not only on the lives of individuals but on the structure of states; and in all countries. Here in Canada they have been working as solvents on Confederation itself and on the whole pattern of our national life.

In this day, it is folly to think that a country, let alone a province, can be an island unto itself. I have spent much of my life in international negotiation and in attempting to settle international disputes. I think I know as well as most the need to curb national sovereignty in the interests of international order and to work towards the day when there will be an effective world organization covering the globe. But I also know that day is far away. I know that, for a long time to come, there will be a need for states,

federal and unitary, to mediate between the weakness and splendour of individuals and the larger, rarer, undifferentiated atmosphere of any imaginable world community. There will long be a need for some intermediate political environment where an individual can live and breathe and know himself in surroundings richer, more familiar, more native to him, than the more rarefied atmosphere of the international world.

Of all the countries in the world that stand in this way between man and his global environment, between the traditions of the past and the hopes of the future, there is none that has the promise of Canada. Ours is one of the richest. Everything that is possible in the world is possible here. Canada's expanse is broad and breathtaking. Our wealth in natural and human resources is great. We have men and women of ability, skill, energy and resolve.

But I am also thinking of deeper things. I am thinking of how Canadians have built and worked together for more than 100 years to open up and develop this country and bind it closer. I am thinking of how, in good times and bad, Canadians from different parts and of different origins have managed to compose their differences with only a minimum of violence or bitterness. I am thinking of the achievements - greater than we realize - that we have had already in the realm of the mind and the spirit. And I am thinking also of what I detect among our young people today - a desire to outstrip those achievements.

Those are some of the reasons why Canada must be dear to us all. But there is a simpler reason for my feeling than all this. It is simply that Canada is ours; that it belongs to us, and - in a deeper sense still - that we all belong to it. We all have our individual memories and our local loyalties that tie us to this land. For each of us those memories and loyalties are different. But they are overlapping. And it is that overlapping tissue of loyalties, involving our hearts more than our minds, which, more than anything else, constitutes this country: To tear apart these loyalties would be to destroy the country and to leave us all diminished.

We all know that French Canada today feels a deep dissatisfaction with its place in Confederation. The reasons for that are complex and of varying significance. I have said in the past, and I repeat now, that I believe most of those reasons to be entirely justified. But this is not the occasion either to try to analyse why there is discontent in French Canada or to weigh judiciously everything that has contributed to produce that result. What is far more important is to admit that this dissatisfaction is a fact and to recognize that, if it is allowed to continue without remedy, it could lead to separation and to the end of Confederation.

Equally important is to recognize that it lies within our power to prevent this, to remove the causes of discontent, to lay the groundwork for a great new act of accommodation which will ensure the hopes and aspirations of all Canadians. It is to nothing less than this that we must commit ourselves at this conference.

Most of you know me well enough to know that, whatever gifts I may have, eloquence is not among them. But I wish this morning I had some of the

eloquence of D'Arcy McGee or Wilfrid Laurier. I wish my voice could rouse all Canadians to what this moment requires of us all.

This conference seems to be about the same as many others. The weather is about as you would expect at this time of year. People are going about their business as usual. But this is not a usual occasion. It is a critical one, and our decisions will be crucial for Canada.

I was born and bred in Ontario and have never ceased to be proud of that inheritance. Ontario is in many ways central in these discussions - as the most populous province, and the richest, and as the province where there is the longest tradition of living and working together with French Canada. I think of those days after the passage of the Act of Union in 1841, when Kingston was the capital of Canada; when Robert Baldwin was elected to the legislature at a by-election in Quebec and Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine was elected at a by-election in Ontario.

The position of Ontario is central for another reason. More may be asked of it than of any other province in the way of innovation and magnanimity. In its turn, the loss that would be caused by dismemberment would be almost as great for Ontario as it would be for Quebec. Ontario would be weakened and impoverished as a result; so much has the character and flavour of life in English-speaking Eastern Canada depended on our partnership in so many ways with French-Canadians.

This question of what kind of Canada would be left if Quebec were to withdraw from Confederation will be deeply pondered by English-speaking Canadians in every other part of the country as well, even though the tragic results may be less obvious the farther away you move from the Province of Quebec.

Perhaps it is in the Western Provinces that the cardinal problems we must grapple with today are likely to seem most remote. There, the heartland of French Canada is far away. The settlements of French-Canadians are few and infrequent, and life has been deeply coloured by the flow of immigrants from countries other than France or the British Isles.

I would beg Canadians of such different ethnic origins to believe that any proposals of the Federal Government - or indeed of any other government - at this conference are put forward in full recognition of the great contribution they have made to Canadian life, not only in the West but in every other part of Canada; and in full recognition also of the sacrifices they have made to serve and enrich this country. I believe that these other Canadians will find the new course we are proposing for Canada easier to accept and support if they remember that the country to which they have committed themselves and their children, and the country where they have found their freedom, may not endure without a great new act of accommodation. For let me be explicit - what is at stake, in my opinion, is no less than Canada's survival as a nation.

Some aspects of constitutional change may also not come easy to many in these old provinces by the Atlantic seaboard. I would ask them to believe that I am very much aware of the decisive part those provinces played in the creation of our country 100 years ago. I am very much aware also that economic progress there has been slower than in other parts of the country. I have joined others before me in trying to remedy that, but I am very conscious of the fact that much more remains to be done. Indeed, I regard the problem of raising economic levels in the Atlantic Provinces as a principal aspect of the total problem of maintaining Canadian unity. There will, I know, be support from those provinces for a programme of constitutional progress and reform, if only because they also would be surely and quickly injured if Canada were divided.

What I would say to French-speaking Canadians is perhaps best expressed in the programme of policy that I have put forward in the document entitled Federalism for the Future. I should like to say merely two things. The first is a comment on the suggestion that has been made that, if Quebec were to secede, it could then enter into negotiations with Ottawa in order to work out a modus vivendi with the rest of Canada while acquiring independent sovereignty. As someone not without experience in international negotiations, I should like to state my view that any such proposal rests on illusion - indeed, on a whole set of illusions. It is an illusion to think that a declared intention to seek a disputed divorce can be the basis for amicable and productive negotiations, especially when the parties concerned are still living in the same house or as next-door neighbours. It may even be an illusion to think that in such circumstances there would necessarily be an "Ottawa" that could speak for the whole of English-speaking Canada. Indeed, the whole proposal disguises the obvious fact that separation could not be carried out without rupture and loss and pain.

Secondly, and more generally and positively, I should like to say a few words to French Canada in explanation of the spirit that animates the course of action I think should be taken. It is designed essentially to create conditions - and with all possible speed - so that French-speaking Canadians may feel that every part of this country is their homeland. But this feeling requires understanding and goodwill and patience - on their part as well as on the part of English-speaking Canada.

Our federal proposals are designed to set in train a process of constitutional review so that Quebec may have the largest possible scope for the development of its own society, its own destiny, in Canada. But this process of change must be consistent - let there be no doubt on this - with the continued existence of Canada as a single federal state.

Since I became Prime Minister of this country, almost five years ago, I have been privileged to take some initiatives to help meet developing threats to Canada's very survival as a nation. In the course of the last few months, my Government has been giving careful thought to the results of these initiatives. We have been also ranging much more widely in our deliberations in order to leave no area unexamined where there might be opportunities for constructive action. It is to this end that we are presenting certain proposals at this conference.

Last October, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism submitted the first volume of its final report. That volume deals with English and French as the two official languages of Canada; with the basic issue of

cultural and linguistic equality. It makes 14 recommendations. Some of them are addressed to the Federal Government. We accept these and we shall proceed to implement them as quickly as we can.

Some are addressed to the provincial governments. We hope that the provinces will find it possible to accept them. For our part, we stand ready to offer such help as may be necessary and desired.

Some of the recommendations are addressed to the federal and provincial governments jointly. In those cases, we should be glad to enter immediately into negotiations with the provinces, with a view to agreement on joint implementation. As I see it, it will be one of the most important tasks of this conference, with top priority, to secure the widest possible measure of agreement on these far-reaching and carefully considered recommendations.

There are recommendations which if accepted, would involve changes to the British North America Act which would have to be agreed to by the federal and provincial governments. These two changes, whether in the precise form recommended or in some other, are, in my view, fundamental if we are to establish and to ensure the basic principle of equality for the communities of people speaking our two official languages. It is essential for Canada that this principle be accepted and become real.

I hope also that we can reach agreement in principle at this conference on a constitutional charter of rights for all Canadians. This would cover a wide variety of rights, political, legal, egalitarian as well as linguistic. To agree on the detailed provisions and the mode and pace of enactment of a charter of human rights will clearly not be easy, and it will take time. There are subtle and important legal and constitutional questions at issue. But I would urge that in this process none of us lose sight of the large goals before us. What we shall be aiming at, if we can agree here in principle, is to provide a firmer, wider and more secure basis for the freedom of all Canadians, not only as individuals but also as members of particular societies within a larger unity. That, I believe is the beacon that we should steer by.

I hope, finally, that we can agree here to undertake jointly - as a matter of fundamental importance - a comprehensive constitutional review, and agree, as well, on the methods and procedures that we should follow in carrying it out. The British North America Act was a great act of statesmanship in its day. It has served as the constitutional basis for the growth of the strong and varied Confederation that we know today. But it is hardly to be expected that an Act passed more than 100 years ago should be adequate for all the needs or aspirations of Canadians today and for the future.

That is why my colleagues and I recommend that we now agree to begin a systematic and balanced process of constitutional review. It is impossible for me, or for anyone else, to forecast in advance what the ultimate and agreed results of this are likely to be. But, as an indication of the scope of the review that we recommend, we should want to include in it the institutions of federalism, such as the composition and functions of the Supreme Court of Canada, and the Senate. Certainly, a most important part of any such review would be the division of powers and jurisdiction between the federal and provincial governments.

It will be obvious that courage and imagination will be needed from us all if we are to set our hands effectively at this conference to this kind of stage-by-stage action, which I, for one, believe essential.

In our initial discussions, this week, the representatives of the Federal Government will, of course, be receptive to the wishes and open-minded to the proposals of every province. But I should be less than candid if I failed to point out that there are certain federal positions which must be maintained. The Federal Government must be strong enough to carry out its responsibilities for moderating economic fluctuations and for promoting economic growth. It must be able to promote economic equality for Canadians in all parts of the country and for every economic region. It must maintain the right and the power to assist in research and in cultural developments. It must maintain the unity of Canada's foreign policy, as an indispensable attribute for any state that does not intend to allow itself to be divided.

I believe that the review which I am recommending will prove that there is large room for constitutional revision. But even now Canada has one of the more decentralized federal systems of the world. For us, this is right. But federal powers must not be so reduced that the Government of Canada will be unable to carry out the responsibilities it must discharge if the country is to remain strong, prosperous and united.

The reservations that I have listed are important. But none of them need stand in the way of the great new act of reform and accommodation which we believe should now be undertaken. On the contrary, they are to be regarded as a necessary complement to it, since it would be impossible to build more amply without maintaining the strength at the centre which is necessary to hold the whole structure together.

Let me recapitulate, then, the main elements of a programme to being about a new federalism:

- (1) Agreement at this conference to accept the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism recommending English and French as our official languages and establishing the cultural and linguistic equality of the two groups who together made Confederation with constitutional guarantees in that regard.
- (2) Agreement on the principle that certain basic rights should be constitutionally secured for all Canadians.
- (3) Agreement to embark on a comprehensive process of constitutional review.

The nature of such a programme puts it above regional or racial or party interest or advantage. It is a programme for all Canada.

In moving in the direction I have been recommending, we shall be making many new departures and slipping some old moorings. Some traditions may be altered or left behind in the process. For some that will be painful. As for me, I believe it can be done in a way which will meet the challenge of the future without betraying the values of the past.

Finally, I should like to direct a few words to those who are younger than we are. It is to their judgment that everything we do here - or fail to do - must ultimately be submitted. It is their future we are dealing with. It is their country, even more than ours, that we are attempting to refashion and strengthen. So I would invite their interest and sympathy and co-operation as well as their criticism and suggestions.

Presiding over this conference is one of my last major responsibilities as the Prime Minister of Canada. As I look back over the past five years, I can think of things that I have left undone and of things that I might have done better. But I am not troubled by the thought of any conscious failure of devotion, on my part, to Canada, or its interests, or to any of its people. So it is with a full heart - but with full confidence, too - that I invite you to join with me in the task of building an even freer, greater and more generous future for our beloved country.

S/A