



Statements and Speeches

No. 80/7

ASPECTS OF THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM

A Speech by Canada's Ambassador to France, His Excellency Gérard Pelletier, at a debate organized by the Groupe Sénatorial d'amitié France-Canada, Paris, May 7, 1980

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 which bring 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.

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 break-up 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".

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 precipitation. 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.

But this is not the only reason, nor even, perhaps, the most important. To be convinced of this, one has only to consult the opinion polls that are proliferating in Quebec on the eve of the referendum, as you can well imagine. With a few small differences, they all reveal the same trends. To cite only the most recent, Quebecers are apparently divided equally between the 'yes' and the 'no', with an undecided margin varying between 12 and 25 per cent. What can we conclude but that the secessionist proposal is far from bringing unanimity in Quebec, and that its promoters have always known this. At the beginning of the referendum campaign, the Premier of Quebec stated that a 'yes' vote of 40 per cent would be enough to give him the courage to continue the venture.

The ambition of this figure will appear very modest to those who do not know the Canadian situation very well. But when one looks closely at it, one can easily understand the modesty.

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

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 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 his North American colleagues.

"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 belies 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 \$10 billion; in 12 years, the total assets of the *caisses d'entraide économique* (economic credit unions) went from \$1 million to more than \$1 billion. Moreover, by creating a universal pension plan we have been able to increase our collective savings considerably: the *caisse de dépôt et de placement* (deposit and investment fund) now ranks among the largest investment companies in Canada in terms of size and the variety of its holdings. As for Hydro-Quebec, its assets make it the biggest firm of any kind in Canada and one of the largest producers and distributors of electricity in North America.

"We are already a rich province. In 1978, our *per capita* gross domestic product ranked Quebec fourteenth among 150 countries in the world.*"

We Quebecers are therefore not the damned of the earth, even in the eyes of the harshest critics of the present system. Those critics may have denounced the "crimes" committed under federalism, pointed out certain very real cases of injustice of which we were the victims, but they have to admit that we are not emerging from a century

* Source: OECD, main economic indicators, April 1979. These comparisons are based on the national GDP/*per capita* in American dollars.

of confederal cohabitation with our Anglophone compatriots as an impoverished people — quite the contrary. The White Paper does stress that the situation we find ourselves in is not the result of "some political system". It follows nonetheless from this description that Canadian federalism, despite its faults, has not prevented Quebecers from developing their culture and their economy. That is probably what is making half of them (perhaps more — we will know on May 21) hesitate over the venture being proposed to them.

They know from personal experience that the Canadian federal system is one of the most decentralized in the world and that Quebec enjoys a great deal of autonomy. The government of the province has exclusive powers in some very important areas: it is master in its own house in the area of education, is sole administrator of justice in its own territory, exploits its vast natural resources as it sees fit, has its own police force, is free to raise any kind of loan where it wishes and how it wishes in Canada or abroad without even notifying the Federal Government, legislates in the area of language, and has a great deal of authority, often the lion's share, in social security and urban development. With the exception of national defence and foreign affairs, there are hardly any areas from which it is excluded. As far as foreign affairs are concerned, it does have general delegations in several countries — France, for example — and is a member of the principal organization of *La Francophonie internationale*, the Agency for Cultural and Technical Co-operation, as a participating government.

It is therefore not, as people in other countries often tend to believe, an ostracized, powerless Francophone community, paralyzed in its development by an oppressive system and unitary institutions which deny it all right to be different, to use an expression in vogue with those who advocate sovereignty. Certain minorities in the Anglophone provinces are probably right in reproaching their provincial governments for not complying with their cultural aspirations. However, it is by virtue of the same exclusive powers which Quebec enjoys that some governments refuse their French-speaking communities certain rights.

It is obvious that there are serious reasons for discontent, since we are now facing a crisis situation. However, a very large number of Quebecers still believe that it would be easier to find the solutions to their problems under renewed federalism than it would be if the proposed secession were to occur.

They reject, for example, the discontinuance of the Federal Government, in which Quebec is very well represented. It is a well-known fact that Canada's Francophone community scored some important points during the past decade as it became aware of its political power. The federal authorities were the first, ahead even of Quebec itself, to pass language legislation to protect and spread the French language throughout Canada. I know that certain commentators in Canada and even in France are quick to say that the official languages policy initiated by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1969 has ended in failure. Many examples can probably be cited in support of that conclusion. The Canadian Government itself, far from hiding the problems, reports on any failures. It was aware from the beginning that its language policy would meet with a great deal of resistance because it constituted a real revolution for English-speaking Canadians and its application would take years to

ensure. It appointed an Official Languages Commissioner, a permanent, strict and uncompromising guardian, to report to Parliament on violations to the spirit and the letter of the legislation. Just last week, in the middle of the referendum campaign, the Commissioner publicly and harshly criticized in his annual report the obstinate way in which the application of the Act has been and still is being delayed, neglected and resisted, ten years after the legislation was passed.

Can one really say that the policy has failed? Before answering that question, one has to carefully define what the policy was designed to accomplish. An apparently undying myth, and I say undying because it is still being propagated by responsible journalists, has it that Mr. Trudeau dreamed of transforming 23 million Canadians into perfectly bilingual citizens. If that were really the case, his policy could only have ended in absolute failure. However, there was never any question of undertaking such a project. The objective of the Act and the policy is ambitious, admittedly, but it is also realistic. The goal is to ensure that every Canadian citizen is able to communicate with the central Government and receive services from that Government in the official language of his choice; to make possible the free use of French and English in the public service and all government agencies. In point of fact, the goal is to gain acceptance for the French language and give it equal status in the enormous state machine which had largely ostracized it for more than a century. It goes without saying that, after ten years, this goal has not yet been realized.

However, must we speak of failure and preach surrender when enormous progress has been made? The extension of French radio and television from the Atlantic to the Pacific does not constitute a failure. The simultaneous publishing in French and English of all legislation and of thousands of publications, reports and studies of various kinds is now a reality. The possibility for tens of thousands of Francophone public servants to work in their own language, where they once had to adopt English as their language of work is not an illusion. Nor is the promotion of thousands of Francophones to positions to which, until now, they had no access. A crushing failure? As the saying goes, "give a dog an ill name and hang him". If politics has taught me anything, it is that in that art, all success is relative.

These, then, are a few reasons why many Quebecers have serious doubts about the advisability of saying 'yes' to sovereignty-association. And these are not the only reasons. I must mention the one that impresses me personally more than all the others — the danger of breaking the Canadian union, in face of the attraction of such a powerful neighbour. Would a politically isolated Quebec have any chance of resisting eventual assimilation by the United States, even if it remained within the Canadian economic entity? I am not the only one to believe that the secession of Quebec would bring a breaking up of Canada, not into two but into three or four pieces each of which would sooner or later find itself in the American union. This is of course not the worst thing that could happen to a people. But in my opinion, our French-speaking community would lose every chance, not only of developing but of surviving culturally, in such an adventure.

However, let us return to the referendum. It is already well known, because they are not embarrassed to admit it, that many federalists who are opposed to any total or

partial secession, will still say 'yes' when they go to the polling booth on May 20. How are we to interpret this paradox? An eminent Quebec political scientist has just explained his position publicly. He does not believe in the secessionist proposal. He rejects sovereignty-association. But he wants a renewed federalism according to another formula. He is afraid that by voting 'no' he would be endorsing the *status quo*. He will therefore vote 'yes', but only in order to give the federal authorities and the English-speaking provinces a shock sufficient to set in motion serious negotiations toward a radical renewal of Canadian institutions. He will not be the only one. I know some labour militants, former colleagues from the time when I myself was a union worker, who will vote 'yes' even though they want to stay in Canada. "It's simple, one of them said to me. "Now that we're into the ultimate blackmail, we'll keep on rolling. Otherwise, we would lose all negotiating power. But you'll see. Everything will work out." Let me add that this worker voted for Mr. Trudeau in the last federal elections, as did 68.3 per cent of the Quebecers who voted that day. Neither his attitude nor that of the political scientist I mentioned earlier, obeys the strictest rule of Cartesian logic, and I have a thousand reservations about these positions. But they are a fact which must be taken into consideration.

If there were a victory of the 'yes' side, it would certainly not be devoid of meaning. It would even have a number of meanings, as can already be observed. And if the 'no' side won the day, it would represent a refusal of sovereignty-association but certainly not an endorsement of the *status quo*.

Doubtless either verdict, despite its ambiguity, will be in line with a movement that is either secessionist or federalist. But neither verdict will be conclusive.

One thing we can predict with certainty is that Canadian political life is in no danger of falling back into the lethargy that men and women of my generation complained about bitterly when we were 20.