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FRENCH-CANADA AND THE FUTURE OF CONFEDERATION

Speech by the Honourable Paul Martin, Secretary of State for External Affairs, to the Club Richelieu-Montréal, Montreal, December 7, 1967.

Canada and Quebec are now faced with a situation the seriousness - or I might even say the gravity - of which must not be underestimated.

Recent events have no doubt precipitated the development of the situation. The restlessness within Quebec, the Toronto conference, the Laurendeau-Dunton report - these factors have suddenly placed Confederation, as we know it today, in question, and more pressingly than ever before.

It is as yet too early to assess fully the effects on Canada's future of this sudden concentration of activity, but it is not too soon to see that it has accelerated matters, clarified the debate and created public interest in the problem throughout the entire country.

The situation in Quebec is, in fact, developing very rapidly; we, however, are meeting the question of unity, or, if you prefer, Canadian solidarity, with optimism, particularly since we are convinced that generally acceptable solutions are now in view. I hope that all Quebecers share this conviction with me.

The great debate on Canada's future in which we are now involved is one which Canadians of every province should follow with their hearts and minds, and one which provincial leaders should approach with a sense of great responsibility, for the attitudes and positions of all the governments of Canada will determine the country's future. This responsibility may be shared but no one has the right to refuse it. No part of Canada is free of the responsibility of contributing to the solution of the problem, just as no group will escape the consequences of failure arising out of their refusal of this responsibility.

I must point out, however, that the Federal Government, as the representative of all Canadians, is the rightful guardian of the integrity of Canada; this is a responsibility which is basic to its role and which it intends to carry out.

In the final analysis, it is the central government which must assess and evaluate all the factors involved in order to ensure not only the very existence of Canada but the mutual comprehension and the climate which will allow us to work together for the future.

We are assuming this responsibility at the present time by examining the situation as it really is and by recognizing the causes of the problem. We are fully aware of the situation.

Some still feel that, because there have always been difficulties between our two groups and because they have always been overcome whenever they threatened the nation's unity, we need not take the present crisis too seriously. A little patching here, a minor concession there - such methods have always solved matters. These people believe that time will settle the problems of today.

In my opinion, such an attitude is disastrously shortsighted. It ignores facts which are only too obvious. It is the inevitable forerunner of national disintegration. The time for patching is over. We must now face up to an evolution so rapid that it has left some breathless, and we must reorganize Confederation so that it will be able to meet the needs of the future. This work has already begun, and very soon we shall be able to move forward to action.

This is a task which, unfortunately, cannot be completed in one day, or even in seven. No one could make such a claim. This is a task which must be carried out with an awareness of the existence of the two main Canadian communities. For, let us be realistic, as long as French-Canadians are not convinced that they can continue to develop a society in keeping with their own aspirations and that they can truly participate in the development of Canada as a whole, we shall be subjected to the same friction which we are experiencing today. As long as we shall not have found, through a consensus representing at least a majority, a new constitutional stability, we shall be unable to go on and build the Canada of the future, which will guarantee well-being and equality of opportunity to all Canadians.

I said recently, and I repeat it again today, that we must do, and shall do, everything within our power to give French Canada full confidence in Canadian institutions. We must convince French Canada through action that her best chances for the future lie within one great new Canada. A strong Canada to me implies a strong French-Canadian community.

While we talk more and more about, and preoccupy ourselves with, the relations of French Canada with the rest of Canada, we must not forget the cultural, political and economic contribution of Canadians other than those of Anglo-Saxon or French origin.

It is important to remind ourselves that this group accounts for more than a quarter of the population of this country and that, when we talk of Canadian "reality", we must take it into account as a very important element in the building of the Canada of tomorrow.

This primary objective, which is essential to the very survival of Canada, as we know it, will be attained when French Canada feels secure as a community throughout the country.

This is a task which must also take into account the interests and the levels of development in the different regions of Canada.

It is obvious that the administration of a country as vast as Canada, made up of regions whose levels of development differ in every area, must be aware of all the problems which exist beyond the limits of the capital, from one ocean to the other, including those of the smallest areas, whether privileged or underprivileged, developed or underdeveloped.

In this connection, we have received some extremely useful indications of the problems in the different provinces as a result of the conference which took place last week. We are now more fully aware of what the other provinces want. For us in the central government, the question does not arise solely in connection with Quebec.

This concern is necessary if the policies which are the responsibility of the central government are to be planned and co-ordinated to fit the various situations throughout Canada.

I realize that, in sum, all French-Canadians are seeking the means which will give them the best chance of survival and development. I can hardly be indifferent to this great adventure which has been going on now for several years, and I am convinced that this search and this questioning from all sides, and from Quebec in particular, will be of profit to Quebec and to Canada as a whole. We must not fear the reforms which become necessary.

There comes a time in the history of nations when there must be a renewal of national effort, when a new consensus must be found, and when old loyalties must be tempered anew. This renewal cannot come out of complacency. We shall achieve this renewal, despite the difficulties.

Quebec and French Canada have thrown a challenge to Canada. This challenge must be taken up if the Quebec team is to remain in the Canadian league. The game will be exciting and tight, but it will never come to an end. The teams will be strong and both must adapt their play to the rapid evolution of our society.

We must recognize that there is a serious basis for the grievances of the French-Canadians; that there is a long history of frustration and exasperation caused by a Canada which, in some ways, has more or less ignored the aspirations of French Canada; that French Canada, for many reasons, has not contributed sufficiently to the leadership of the country and the exercise of political and economic power.

However, we must also recognize that French Canada has enjoyed certain advantages as a part of Canada and North American society and, at the very moment when it is beginning to consolidate its development in every field, when it is beginning to assume its relative position in the modern world, some advocate its separation from Canada. Canada would lose by it, I am sure of that. Quebec would lose as well.

Quebec already has certain established rights for which she has no need to struggle. These rights must surely be of some value to French-Canadians as individuals. These rights give you and me and our two communities an inalienable place on the Canadian stage.

I do not see why Quebecers would want to throw away something they have, something which they could develop even further in the future.

I know that, to some, these rights do not have, or no longer have, any value. This is because they have not yet been able to make full use of them, for reasons for which French Canada itself is partially responsible.

However, the battle of French Canada is not yet over. It is in Canada that it must be fought. The struggle for the survival of individuals and of groups, wherever they may be, is not an easy one, particularly when the rules of the game work to their disadvantage, as has been the case for French Canada in this country. We must admit the fact. And we have no need of outsiders to remind us of it. But would the rules of the game be any more favourable for an independent Quebec? I believe not.

The French-Canadian, if he wishes to survive and to progress, must make a constant effort to do so.

His only protection is his own will to survive.

He would have no greater protection in his own state than he could have within a Canada in which he is a full partner. Furthermore, on the international level, for example, the French-Canadian speaks through the intermediary of a country with a population of 20 million; he is backed in the world by the support of the great nation of which he is part.

In actual fact, nothing is easy. All aspects of life, whatever the structures of society, where one must work within the framework of man-made institutions, demand constant and strenuous effort. It is not easy for an English-speaking Canadian to represent a constituency in the Parliament of Canada. It is still more difficult for those who represent French-Canadian communities. They must struggle desperately, and often without recognition, for the interests of the citizens whom they represent. The work which they are doing with their English-speaking fellow citizens for French Canada and for Canada as a whole will soon produce a new Canada which can command the loyalty of all Canadians.

We all have the maturity, the wisdom and the vision required to plan and build this new Canada ourselves.

Canada, nevertheless, offers French Canada her best opportunity. Canada will see to it that these opportunities become even greater, for she is realizing, as Quebec asserts herself, grows in importance and assumes an ever larger role, that she cannot do without these six million French-Canadians in the task of building a new Canada.

Without Quebec, Canada would lose almost one-third of her greatest resource - the men she needs to dream of, plan, guide and build Canada. And this one-third is extremely important, its potential enormous for Canada, but on the condition that it remain what it is - French-Canadian.

The Prime Minister, replying a week ago to one of Canada's "regular advisers", whose opinion is never requested but often offered, emphasized again the determination of the Federal Government to make a new start:

"The future of Canada will be decided in Canada, by Canadians. I have confidence, and I know all members of this House have confidence, in the ability and good sense of all Canadians, French-speaking or English-speaking, to make the right decisions. They will do it in their own way and through their own democratic process. I believe this decision will require further constitutional changes to bring our federalism up to date and to ensure, among other things, that French-speaking Canadians, who form one of our two founding cultural and linguistic groups (or societies, if you like), will have their rights accepted and respected in Canada."

Within a few months, we shall be in a position to show tangible progress. By then, we shall have studied the results of the Toronto conference and gone thoroughly into the Laurendeau-Dunton report. In particular, we shall have experienced the first test, that of the Federal-Provincial Conference on Civil Rights.

I should like to emphasize this point, since it seems to me that, throughout this debate, not enough attention has been given to its importance. Even the enlightened, whose who are concerned every day with the rights, the survival and the growth of the French-Canadian community, do not appear to have realized all the effects of introducing the principles of cultural and linguistic equality across Canada into the constitution. Quebec does not seem to have grasped all the constitutional implications of a measure of this nature, all the doors which will be opened by it to the essential constitutional changes. Moreover, all the recommendations of the Report on Bilingualism and Biculturalism will be on the agenda of this conference. This will make the first step in the implementation of the measure for which a need is demonstrated by all the work, all the studies, all the commissions and all the debates. From the first phase, which is one of information, organization and study, we shall go on to action. I am convinced that the results will be profitable for our two communities and the future of Canada.

This measure will be a true turning-point; it will demonstrate to us all that Canadian solidarity does indeed exist, if the people of Canada, whether French- or English-speaking, are prepared to accept each other as they are. For this is the crux of the matter, the desire to live together in two different communities.

From this point of view, the most recent official discussions have performed an immense service for Canada. They have permitted the first contact in today's new atmosphere. They have allowed the first citizens of the provinces to talk, to see and understand each other, instead of engaging in quarrels via the news media.

We shall build this country together. We shall give the Canadian federal system the flexibility and the originality which it must have for the proper operation of its administration and the growth of its economy.

To accomplish this, we must establish better means of co-ordination between the various levels of government, in order to maximize, as far as possible, the effectiveness of the economic and social government of our country.

The success of this great venture which we are now undertaking will make a strong and important country, and one which has succeeded in creating a respected place for several communities within a single political framework.

In conclusion, I ask all French-Canadians to put their confidence in a Canada which they will really be asked to help build. The influence of French Canada on the new "take-off" of this country in its second century is felt more and more. All of Canada is ready and willing to accept this influence.

We shall succeed, if we do not hesitate to establish the necessary bases for the development of a country whose extraordinary future we can only partly foresee - a future for all its citizens - a future of great influence in the world. We have but to want it.

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