



Statements and Speeches

No. 78/8

CANADA IN THE NEWS

Speech to the Académie diplomatique internationale, Paris, on May 23, 1978, by Canada's Ambassador to France, His Excellency Gérard Pelletier.

I did not give my talk the title "Canada in the News" just for the sake of boasting. There are those who might at once object that Canada is not really the subject of conversation so very often, and that we hardly make headlines every day, every week — or even every month — in the international press. Even so, it is true that more attention has been paid to Canada for almost two years now, and there is a very specific reason for this — our national unity is being threatened. Until recently, no one outside the country and very few inside it doubted the stability of the Canadian Confederation, but that was before a nationalist party came into power in Quebec, the Canadian province that is predominantly French. This party itself does not speak for the majority of Quebecers since, because of the way our institutions work, though the party obtained a clear majority of the seats in the provincial legislature and formed the government, it did so with only 41 per cent of the popular vote. Moreover, this party did not get itself elected on a secessionist platform. On the contrary, the question of independence was put aside at the beginning of the election campaign that brought the party to power, to be reconsidered at a later date by means of an eventual referendum, which is supposed to resolve the issue some time next year. The Quebec government, therefore, has no mandate to lead the province out of Canada, though its expressed objective, which has always been included in the Parti Québécois program, is to make the province into an independent state. At best it would accept political sovereignty coupled with economic union with the rest of the country. The threat therefore exists — real enough, if not immediate — and it is because of this threat that there is now more talk about Canada, especially in Europe. It is no surprise, for instance, that the French press follows events in Canada with very special attention, in view of the part that the epicentre of the crisis is in Quebec — the largest French-speaking community outside France.

It is not customary for an ambassador to explain the domestic problems of his country to foreigners. However, I have two reasons for choosing to do so. In the first place, the Canadian Government refuses to bury its head in the sand or to evade the questions asked by its friends in other countries. Secondly, it is clear that the internal debate taking place in my country has some significance — indeed, even definite implications — for Europe. And so I should like, first of all, to summarize the Canadian situation and then to weigh the consequences of the outcome of this crisis for our European friends.

The Canadian situation — how can one summarize, without being guilty of caricature, a complex political situation resulting from a long chain of historical developments? The present crisis goes back to the very origins of Canada, which should perhaps be briefly considered here. First of all, we must recall that for a century and a half, from

the beginning of the seventeenth century until the middle of the eighteenth century, the French settled along the Atlantic coast and the banks of the St Lawrence River. At the time of the military conquest by Britain in 1760, New France was inhabited by a people that was developing rapidly, by a community that, though still small (60,000), had already achieved a remarkable level of organization. This society shared a vast territory in the eastern part of what is today Canada with the native Amerindian population, which was sparsely settled on the land. Thus it was from a French colony that modern Canada grew, and the French-speaking population was to remain the majority group until the mid-nineteenth century, when immigrants arriving directly from the British Isles or driven north by the American Revolution tipped the demographic balance in favour of the English-speaking group. This numerical superiority was to increase steadily right up to the present time because immigration from French-speaking countries dried up almost completely, and also because, in the last century, most non-British immigrants adopted the language of the new English-speaking majority. These immigrants now make up one-third of the Canadian population.

Military conquests, as we all know, cause more problems than they solve. From 1760 to 1867, the history of Canada was to be marked by almost continuous political disagreement between the two founding peoples of the country, the French Canadians and the English Canadians. Fortunately, despite a short armed rebellion in 1837, this confrontation did not hinder the country's development. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, it had become clear that Canada was caught in an impasse. Growth would soon come to a halt unless the scattered colonies of which it was formed were grouped together into a coherent whole and unless a new political structure was set up to ensure its unity.

And so the Canadian Confederation was born. It originally consisted of four provinces – today there are ten. Bringing them together was to prove difficult, even though the plans were executed under the authority of the mother country, Britain, which was at that time all-powerful. Some of the English provinces – Prince Edward Island in the east, for example – at first refused to join the others. In French-speaking Quebec strong opposition was expressed at the time, but only by a minority. Whereas most of the English provinces saw this undertaking chiefly as an opportunity to turn the young, scattered colonies into a large and prosperous country, the French were attracted mainly by the federal formula that gave them at last a provincial government of their own and at the same time assured them of very considerable participation in the government of the country as a whole due to their numerical strength. However, the decisive argument in favour of Confederation may well have been something quite different. The French and English Canadians both felt the urgent need to create a political entity that would be large enough and strong enough to resist the pull of the United States. The young giant was already manifesting its power, which before long surpassed that of all other countries. On two occasions Canada had been invaded by the Americans; peace had been made and friendly relations had been restored, but Canadians did not forget. They were witness to the extraordinary vitality of their great neighbour and they knew that their weakness would eventually lead to annexation – unless a new system brought a similar energy

and strength to their own country and to some degree reduced the demographic and territorial disproportion.

This, then, briefly sums up the conditions and developments that in 1867 led our two cultural communities and our four political entities to form the present Canadian Confederation. There is much to be said for this new political structure. In the first place, it provided the impetus that, in only one century, has led our country to become the sixth-greatest industrial power in the West. It has allowed Canada to extend its territory westward to the Pacific, eastward to Newfoundland, and north to the Magnetic Pole. The federal structure has enabled Canada to achieve independence by peaceful means and to become a land of freedom in which human rights are respected and equality of opportunity constantly promoted. It has also made us a prosperous nation. Though statistics are not everything, it might be noted that between 1967 and 1976 Canada experienced a growth-rate surpassed only by that of Japan, the gross national product rose by 53 per cent (compared to a 26 per cent increase in the United States) and real disposable income jumped by 74 per cent. Canadians in all provinces therefore enjoy a standard of living that is among the highest in the world.

However, federalism has clearly not resolved all our problems. Those that concern us today are certainly not new ones — they are the legacy of difficulties that already existed a century ago, at the time of the creation of our Confederation.

I shall begin with the gravest of our current problems: the presence in Quebec of a government that plans to put a new independent country on the map of the world in the near future. This danger is doubtless the most serious ever to be faced by the Canadian Confederation, in that it threatens the very existence of Canada as we know it today. No matter what plans for economic association the present government of Quebec proposes, the success of Quebec's efforts to attain sovereignty would certainly have significant economic and political consequences and radically change the balance of power in North America. How does one explain the emergence of such a proposal in this the second-largest of the provinces, after sharing for a century in the common life of the Confederation? Once again I shall have to restrict myself to a short outline of the reasons. Surely the main cause, which is at the root of all others, is to be found in the economic and language situation of the French-speaking Canadians, a situation that already existed in 1867. Cut off from its cultural origins, the French population of Canada turned inward after the British conquest — a readily-understandable defensive reflex. However, such a defensive position — made necessary by circumstance and the attitudes of the conqueror — did not favour the type of development necessary to any society. The French Canadians — restricted to agriculture and cut off, more or less intentionally, from the world of business, trade and industry — were poorly prepared for the industrial revolution when it suddenly invaded their existence towards the end of the last century. In addition to this startling change, there was also the fact of becoming a minority language group, as I mentioned earlier. In theory, after 1867 federalism should have enabled them to meet this double challenge. In reality, though Quebecers had the necessary political means, almost a century passed before they provided themselves with the kind of educational system and other instruments required for their economic and cultural advancement.

As for the French-speaking communities scattered across the country in provinces with an English majority, they fell victim to what must be called the stubborn intolerance of local authorities. We, the French-speaking people of Canada, had dreamt of a country the whole of which would be accessible to us, where we could speak French and develop culturally as English-speakers were able to do in Quebec. This dream never came true. For the most part, our English-speaking countrymen considered Canada an English-speaking, British nation in which *Francophones* were entitled to certain rights in Quebec but not throughout the country. The Federal Government itself became a private English-speaking preserve into which French-speakers had hardly the right to venture and in which French was barely tolerated. The marked economic inferiority of the French Canadians combined with the language problem to produce an explosive situation, but our governments did not realize how dangerous it was until very late. For example, a study carried out by the Federal Government in 1960 was to reveal that, right across the country, regardless of the prosperity or poverty of the region in question, French-speaking Canadians were always less well-paid than their English counterparts. By the time this situation became officially known, reform had already begun. Quebec had awakened and elected a strong and perspicacious government at the provincial level; it had trained, in increasing numbers, the administrators, scientists and technicians that until then had been lacking; it had strengthened its voice in the Federal Government. English Canada, in turn, began to see the injustice of the situation and changes were brought about. *Francophones* gradually took their place in the federal public service and in economic and political life. They had realized what benefits could be obtained from federal institutions and how to make use of the very considerable autonomy enjoyed by the Canadian provinces. Remarkable progress has been made in the last 25 years, but it comes too late to spare us a secessionist threat. The resurgence of nationalism, a postwar phenomenon, was felt in Canada just as it was throughout the world. Though most French Canadians continue to feel that their collective future lies within Canada, a significant number of others feel that it can only be based on a sovereign Quebec. It must be realized that French Canadians, almost without exception, value their culture as they do their soul. All of us are, and always have been, what you might call cultural nationalists. What is new is that our Quebec separatists embrace *integral nationalism*, which means that they believe it necessary for every nation — large or small — to form a separate and independent country. To appreciate the danger one must also realize that the nationalist drive in Quebec is combined with the decentralizing forces constantly at work within a federation. Like all other countries, Canada suffers from serious regional disparities. Average *per capita* income in the richest regions may be as much as double that in the poorest provinces. In addition, cultural differences, though less extreme than between Quebec and the rest of the country, are nevertheless very marked even within English-speaking Canada. In time of crisis, regional particularism always tends to be accentuated. Discontent is contagious, with the result that the claims of Quebec have now been joined by regional demands from the Canadian West, based on the rapid development of its energy resources, and by protests from the Atlantic Provinces, which, for their part, have no such assets to get them out of the economic stagnation in which they are caught and to which they refuse to resign themselves. If we add to all this the effects of the international crisis, which are strongly felt in Canada, and the unemployment-

inflation dilemma we, as well as everyone else, have to face, the outlook for the future is not very reassuring. Hopeless? No. If we were to equate partial failure with bankruptcy, what country in the world could claim to be sure of its future?

There is profound concern in Canada, but it is neither fatal nor paralyzing. On the contrary, our political scene has never been more lively, or so active in the search for solutions. The majority of Canadians, including the majority of *Francophones* (if we are to believe the surveys, which are unanimous in this respect) still have faith in their country. They are persuaded that an updated Confederation remains the system for Canada's future. Except for the party advocating Quebec sovereignty, all the Canadian and Quebec political parties are talking of a rejuvenated and renewed federalism as the effective solution. A collective reawakening is being experienced, and we are understanding more and more clearly what changes are necessary. It remains to be seen whether these changes can be made in time, but everything seems to indicate that they can. Federalism is a very flexible political instrument. It has already weathered several crises in Canada and it is reasonable to believe that it can weather the present one.

I hope you will not find me presumptuous in saying that the outcome of our present difficulties should be of concern both to Europe and to France, and that it may have important consequences for the future of the Western world. From a European point of view — but, rather than making statements, let me ask a few questions. For example, what immediate effect could the destabilization or break-up of present-day Canada have on Europe? For this is the possibility with which we are confronted. It would be vain to hope that a vague monetary union, or even an economic community, would suffice to bind the Canada provinces together in a coherent whole. Even with its present size, Canada only just succeeds in maintaining its own identity and its independent existence beside the United States. All serious observers agree in predicting that a scattering of isolated provinces would have little chance of doing as well. If Quebec, which represents more than one-quarter of the Canadian population, leaves the Confederation, thus opening up a huge breach in the centre of the territory, it is more than doubtful whether the rest of Canada could survive as a coherent political entity. In the longer term, it is more likely that each piece of a divided Canada, including Quebec, would naturally gravitate towards the huge mass constituted by the United States. Furthermore, this "longer term" might not be so very long. In North America changes occur much more rapidly than in Europe, and there is not the same balance of powers that is found in Europe. The benevolent but massive presence of the United States is an overwhelming reality that could have the effect of precipitating events that could efface in a few decades all traces of what today constitutes Canada as a distinct political entity. This does not mean that the United States would launch a campaign for the conquest or annexation of Canada; its mass alone would act as a magnet to attract the scattered and isolated provinces. Would this new situation be in the interest of Europe, and France in particular? Would they somehow benefit from such an expansion of American power, so that it extended from the Mexican border to the North Pole? I think that all of us would spontaneously answer no. No one in today's world would care to see the strength of a super-power increased. Is not one of the objects of the efforts to unite Europe the

narrowing of the gap between the great powers and the super-powers in order to promote effective dialogue, which is often unbalanced owing to the extreme differences in the sizes of the countries?

If this is self-evident, as I believe it is, let us then leave these hypotheses and move on to consider Canada's role in the international community since the beginning of the century. As a middle power (the largest of the small or the smallest of the large, depending on how you view it), Canada's participation in the wars of 1914 and 1939 and, to an even greater extent, in the postwar restoration of Europe, has adequately proved that our country's actions can be both unique and indispensable. Owing to our geographical location and political situation, we are inevitably attracted towards Europe. Canada seeks alliances on the other side of the Atlantic, certainly not out of indifference, and even less out of aggressiveness towards the United States — which is at once our most important supplier and our largest customer —, but because Canada cannot be a single-alliance country. Nearly two centuries ago Canada chose between continental integration and independent existence. It clearly decided in favour of the second alternative and hence chose to be faithful to the European sources of its founding cultures. However, this choice must be constantly reaffirmed. Canada does this every day and, to this end, seeks and will always seek to balance the influences that act upon it, for this balance is the keystone of the policies it has established for itself. For the same reasons that it refuses continental integration, Canada is pleased to see the consolidation of Europe and is led to establish ties with the European Economic Community. Of course, we maintain cordial and intimate relations with the United States, but this also requires us to seek dialogue with our other allies, without whom there would always be an imbalance in our bilateral relations. Over the past few years, I believe that Canada has proved itself capable of establishing an original and distinctive foreign policy, not through ostentation or bravado but because such a policy was appropriate to the country's self-image and, naturally, to its interests.

Canada is becoming increasingly aware of what Europe has to offer, but we sometimes wonder if Europeans are equally aware of the possibilities that a strong and independent Canada offers them. I am, of course, referring to Canada's vast natural wealth, to its industries and to its fishing and agricultural resources, but also to its desire to maintain multiple alliances, to its privileged relations with France and Britain, to its dual membership in the Commonwealth and the *francophone* world, and its desire to extend its influence. Europe would be contributing to its own decline if it let itself be supplanted in Africa, if it considered Latin America as a private preserve, or left all initiatives in Asia up to others. And, in these three fields of action, Europe can consider Canada as an ideal ally, as an already-established partner whose long-term interests and objectives converge with its own. If the Canadian presence were to disappear from these three regions of the world, who would come in to replace it? It is not difficult to predict that this new presence might block European action, whereas our own offers possibilities of fruitful co-operation.

Does France see the matter in the same light? The dream of an independent *francophone* republic in the northeast part of the American continent is perhaps appealing to some. But surely this is, in fact, just that — only a dream, an illusion.

And we might wonder whether this republic, even if it were created, would actually increase France's cultural contributions and exchanges, considering the privileged relations already existing with Quebec under the France-Canada agreement concluded in 1965. Furthermore, it goes without saying that a sovereign Quebec would bring about not a broadening but a narrowing of the field of *francophone* action in North America. The cultural life of the one million French Canadians living outside Quebec would become more endangered than ever since they would not have the benefit of the considerable influence now exerted by our French province within federal institutions. Assuming, still, that an independent Quebec proved to be viable and lasting, its influence outside its own territory would nevertheless be weaker than at present. In contrast, the federal formula, if brought up to date by means of the necessary modifications and faithfully followed by all members, could enable French Canadians to count on the support of the whole of Canada in affirming the "French fact" in North America.

Economically speaking, it is doubtful that the separation of Quebec would be advantageous to France. If Canada, which is four times as large as a hypothetical independent Quebec, has a hard time resisting pressure from its huge neighbour, a small French-speaking republic would be very hard-pressed to prevent its economy from becoming a tiny extension or satellite of the American economy. Were such a change to take place, would it further the mining and commercial interests of France, which is now investing large amounts of capital in the whole of Canada (often operating out of Quebec, which is a natural port of entry, in view of the common language)? Would it be in the best interests of the large French companies that, using Canada as a base, have already succeeded in gaining important footholds in the American market?

I have tried to outline answers to some of the questions that concern France and Europe in regard to the unity crisis that Canada is experiencing. Of course, these answers are not final. Canada, even in time of crisis, or perhaps because of it, continues to evolve rapidly. One might even predict that Canada will emerge more united than ever from the present difficulties, thanks to rejuvenated institutions that will enable all its communities — especially its French-speaking community — to confirm their roles in the federation and to face the future with greater confidence.