

Conference on  
Cooperative Federalism, Globalization, and Democracy  
Brasilia, Brazil. 9-11 May 2000

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Opening Remarks  
Conference on Cooperative Federalism  
Brasilia, May 9, 2000

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It is a great pleasure to be here in the Brazilian capital talking about something we Canadians have in common with Brazilians: federalism.

Over the centuries different peoples and countries have cultivated many areas of shared or common interest – from political ideology to language and culture, from business and trade to defense and security.

But there is one area of common interest we are only just beginning to explore. And it's what we are here to talk about in the coming days: the federal system of government.

We call our organization the Forum of Federations. And exploring the notion of federalism as a crucial area of common interest is what we are all about.

Our mission is to bring together people from all over the world who share this interest in federalism. . .an interest that could be academic or theoretical, or entirely practical.

In fact we place our greatest emphasis on the practical side and on the people we call the practitioners of federal governance. That, of course, includes many of us here today.

Our goal is to make it possible for practitioners to share and learn from each others' experiences. We want to give people who daily confront all the challenges and problems of governing in a federal context, an opportunity to learn from and share ideas with others.

We call ourselves an international network on federalism — and the word network is key. We are in the business of moving ideas, know-

how, experiences and best practices from people to people and from place to place. Some of you here are already part of this network and we invite the rest of you to become part of our network of practitioners and experts as well.

Last October we organized an international conference on federalism at Mont-Tremblant, a beautiful lakeside resort in the Laurentian mountains of eastern Canada. The setting was lovely, the autumn leaves were in their full colour.

But even more exciting was the experience of bringing together all those people from all over the world – from India, from Russia, from South Africa and Nigeria, from Mexico and Brazil, from Germany and Switzerland and Belgium, from the USA and Canada and from many other countries.

Some were elected government officials... Some civil servants...some academics or thinkers...

There were, among many others: a Nigerian Nobel laureate in literature, the American President, a Canadian expert on the impact of new technologies, and a group of young people from literally around the globe.

They all grappled with the challenges of a way of governing that combines unity with diversity, common direction with heterogeneous goals.

I can honestly report to those of you who weren't there that for people who took part it was an eye-opening experience ... the chance to see federalism through the prism of a great variety of different experiences and points of view.

Many of the participants told us they wanted to continue the exercise – to build on the momentum and keep the information and ideas flowing.

And that is why we are here today.

I think we can all agree that federalism is not always the simplest and most elegant way to govern. I'm sure we've all had the feeling that it would be so much easier if all power and all decisions were concentrated in one place. We would never have to worry about confusion or over-lap of roles. .. never become frustrated by the

seeming inefficiency of getting different levels of government to reach some consensus as to their objectives and the means of achieving them.

It might seem that it would be so much easier and simpler. But the unavoidable reality is that we who live and work in federal countries were just not meant to have simple or easy lives!

And, in any event, what is most easy or elegant or simple is not always what is most just or fair or equitable.

When you are dealing with the challenge of democratically governing in countries as vast and diverse as Canada, the United States, India, or Brazil some kind of federal system seems almost ordained by nature.

Indeed, many of us might want to say of federalism what Winston Churchill said of democracy...that it is "the worst system – except for all the others. . .!"

Like democracy the federal system is not something new. And, by the way, it is hard to imagine genuine federalism without democracy.

One of the essential aspects of federalism is a sort of creative tension between the center and the constituent units.

A viable federal system affords all its different states or provinces the opportunity to stand up for their own interests and to form alliances with others who have shared or complementary interests. At the same time it gives a significant role to a central government that has the job of identifying common goals for the whole country.

It is in the interaction of the two levels of government, from which sound policies should emerge.

But to have this creative tension – this productive interaction – the states or provinces cannot be mere creatures of the central government. They have to have independent legitimacy.

And there is no better way of according legitimacy to a government than through the willing consent of the governed.

As I was saying, federalism is not new. There are models of federated countries going back many centuries. In North America the Iroquois people claim to have invented federalism.

They called their alliance of various tribes in northeastern North America the Iroquois Confederacy.

And the Iroquois say the founding fathers of the United States borrowed the essential concept of federalism from them when they devised a way for thirteen erstwhile colonies to join together to form a new country.

But if federalism is an old and enduring concept it is not a static one. As the world changes and evolves different styles and models of federalism emerge. And today we are also faced with additional models that include supra-national federalism, asymmetrical federalism, and incipient or near-federalism.

In Brazil you are in the process of refining or perhaps even re-inventing your practice of federalism. And we're here to see to it that it is not a lonely or solitary exercise.

We'll have the opportunity over the next few days to hear about Indian, German, American and Canadian experiences of federalism in addition to many different points of view on the Brazilian experience.

As I said earlier, we who live and work and govern in federal countries were not meant to have easy or simple lives. Over the next few days, we should, at the very least, be able to take comfort from the fact that others in far-flung regions of the globe have lives that are as difficult and complicated as ours !

We at the Forum of Federations want you to know that while many of the challenges facing federalism in Brazil may be specific to your country – many are challenges faced at the global level. We hope that in the days to come we can begin a process of learning and sharing that will have genuine resonance when you return to your offices and communities.

What we've learned in the short time we've been in the business of creating an international network on federalism is how much people involved in the great adventure of federal governance around the world have to teach each other.

Brazilians may dance the samba and eat Feijoada while Germans dance the polka and eat sauerkraut and sausages – but both drink at the well of federalism.

What we have to do, and part of what we are doing here, is to develop a common vocabulary of federalism. We have to find ways to talk to each other, to share our perceptions and experiences of federal governance.

That, too, is a goal we at the Forum have set for ourselves and we expect your work here will contribute to the lexicon.

There are some people for whom the word federalism evokes images of instability and fragmentation. That's exactly the opposite of what we believe federalism to imply.

The world needs cultural diversity just as the planet needs biodiversity. What federalism offers is the means to maintain and foster that vital human diversity without endless political fragmentation.

And whatever name you want to give it, the world is seeking more of the skills and knowledge that we choose to call federalism. As democracy spreads, as diverse cultural groups seek to affirm themselves everywhere, federal solutions become inevitable.

And just one last thing before I conclude:

As we go about our work in the next few days we'll be getting into a lot of nuts and bolts practical issues. We'll be looking at the mechanics of federalism in a fairly intense way.

That is fine and well and as it should be. Federalism is a lot more than high sounding rhetoric. Its success lies in getting those details right.

But at the same time don't forget that we're involved in a noble enterprise and in some measure people around the globe have a stake in our doing our job well.

Federalism is not a religion. It is not an ideology. It is perhaps nothing more than a method, a way of doing things.

But in a world as a complex and diverse as ours federalism also represents hope—

...hope that people can work out their differences according to constitutionally determined rules;

...hope that groups and regions can co-operate without losing their

individual character;

...and hope that as new democracies emerge the world doesn't fragment into hundreds of new so-called sovereign (but nevertheless essentially powerless) states.

Let us keep in mind the global dimension of what we are doing here. If we work well here it will make a difference to people in Canada, in the United States ,in Germany, in Russia and India...and in many, many other places.

Thank you...

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