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Notes for an address by
Lucien Bouchard
Premier of Quebec

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Only the text as delivered is valid

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by welcoming you to Quebec. We are delighted to have here with us a number of political figures and experts familiar with the concept of federalism.

It is a political system to which we have devoted a certain amount of reflection, as you can well imagine. As we all know, there may be some difference between the theory of federalism and its daily practice.

On a theoretical level, I have little doubt that participants in this forum can easily agree on some basic principles. We all agree, for instance, that federalism, like other models of political organization, can be a response to the challenge of getting diverse communities to live and prosper together. All will recognize also –– and we, at the outset –– that its implementation has led to positive experiences. How can we ignore, for instance, the remarkable success of the federal system among our neighbours and friends to the south?

But in other places, federalism stirs controversies. We see this particularly in Europe, where the prospect of turning the European Community into a federal union arouses strong opposition.

As a result, to pass judgment on any application of the model, we must relinquish the comfort of academic harmony and take a necessarily controversial plunge into the harsh, complex reality. Debates become particularly spirited when we examine, in a given situation, the quality of relations between member states, the respect of jurisdictions, the satisfaction of collective aspirations, and the affirmation of a sense of belonging.

The federal model cannot encompass every reality. Many countries where

democracy is flourishing have opted for other models of organization. Federalism does not have a monopoly on democracy. Federalism has succeeded where it has been capable of flexibility, efficient functioning between the various levels of government, and respect for the identities of member states. Once formed, a federation is viable only if it fulfills its promises and adapts to the development and the needs of each of its members.

This brings us to the heart of the matter.

Obviously, the organizers of this symposium, without excluding other federal experiences, intended to highlight Canadian federalism. If it was to extol it, allow me to be surprised.

I find it ironical that the Canadian federal government would choose to hold this first forum of federations on the Quebec territory.

Lest it be forgotten, it was on Quebec and Quebeckers that in 1982, a constitution was imposed that diminished the power of the Quebec National Assembly in such sensitive areas as language and education. Need we recall that every Quebec government since then has repudiated this constitution? Quebeckers saw that coup de force for what it was: namely, a breach of the federal pact.

And not only Quebeckers. In 1989, Robert Stanfield, former premier of Nova Scotia and later leader of the official Opposition in Ottawa, made these comments: "The Constitutional package of 1982 was unacceptable to the government of Quebec of the day, is unacceptable to the present government of Quebec, would have been unacceptable to any government of Quebec one can recall or any future government of Quebec one can imagine."

Canadian federalism is also Quebec holding out its hand –– and being rejected –– in 1990, when it proposed a constitutional reform enabling this province us to subscribe with honour to the present constitution.

This effort, known as the Meech Lake Accord, was bluntly turned down by English Canada. In the eyes of many in Quebec, the rest of Canada then showed its unflagging determination to deny Quebec's specificity by keeping it out of the constitutional family.
It is here also that, in the wake of this rebuff, the federalist government of the day had the National Assembly pass a law calling for a referendum on Quebec sovereignty. That referendum was never held because, in the feverish climate of the following months, a new reform proposal, made by the central government, was submitted to a referendum. This proposal was known as the Charlottetown Accord.

Fifty-seven percent of Quebec voters rejected the proposal because they felt it

offered Quebec too little. Conversely, 54 percent of voters in the rest of Canada turned down the proposal because they viewed it as too generous to Quebec.

In the aftermath, in 1993, Quebec elected 54 sovereignist members of Parliament who formed the official Opposition in the House of Commons in Ottawa. The Bloc Québécois remains to this day the main political force on the Quebec federal scene.

It was here again that in October 1995, a newly-elected government proposed through a referendum that Quebec become a sovereign state. The government also sought a mandate to offer a partnership to Canada. More than 93 percent of the electorate exercised their right to vote: 49.4 percent voted yes; 50.6 percent voted no. Fewer than 30,000 votes made the difference.

How can we explain this blockage on the part of Canadian federalism?

The answer lies in the description of our reality.

In North America, Quebec is the only society with a French-speaking majority, a well-defined territorial base, and political institutions it controls. The people of Quebec possess all the traditional characteristics of a nation.

Initially a French colony in America, then a part of the British Empire, following a military conquest, Quebec is now a modern society of seven million inhabitants, respectful of the rights of the English-speaking minority and Native peoples, and proud of the contribution of cultural communities.

The Quebec people subscribe to the democratic concept of a French-speaking nation, pluralist in its culture, and open to international immigration as shown by the ethnic diversity of the Montreal area.

Quebec is the world's 16th economic power. Its economy is among the most open, as 58 percent of its production is exported. Quebec's massive support of the free-trade accord with the United States ensured its conclusion in 1988. As you know, that accord now extends to Mexico.

Quebec's cultural offerings in every field of creativity are known around the world.

And so it is not surprising that Quebec has always sought to protect its existence, promote its culture and common official language –– which is French –– and control the instruments of its economic, social, and political development.

It is in response to these concerns that the Canadian federation was created. The Supreme Court of Canada formally recognized it in its recent decision when it stated: "The social and demographic reality of Quebec explains the existence of

the province of Quebec as a political unit and, indeed, was one of the essential reasons for establishing a federal structure for the Canadian union in 1867."

Quebeckers have always viewed the Canadian federation as a pact between two nations; a pact intended to guarantee their control over their development and matters of their exclusive constitutional competence.

The working of Canadian federalism was criticized very early on because of federal encroachments on provincial powers.

The federal appetite has only grown with the profound changes affecting the demographic and political balance since 1867. To the four founding provinces were added six new ones so that Quebec today accounts for less than a quarter of Canada's total population.

To counteract this notion of two founding peoples, the dogma of provincial equality has recently emerged, denying in effect Quebec's national reality.

Meanwhile, the rest of Canada has asserted its will to forge a true national identity. This has resulted in more and broader intrusions in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction. From the moment Canada defines itself more and more as a single nation, it is inevitable that it should behave as such. The central state necessarily becomes the national state.

This is where the whole dynamics of the blockage is set in motion. For a vast majority of Quebeckers, the seat of the national government is Quebec. Their allegiance to their own people seems to them as natural as that of the other people with whom their ancestors concluded the federal pact.

The blockage is therefore very deep because it results from two intractable visions.

All the rest follows: The proven impossibility to agree on any kind of arrangement, the central government's renewed efforts to assert its preponderance, Quebec's inability to fully discharge its collective responsibilities.

The Canadian government has acquired two powerful tools to achieve its centralizing goals.

First, Ottawa has resorted to a new concept, whose formulation is nowhere to be found in the Canadian constitution. It is the "federal spending power," which the central government invokes to intrude and "spend" in jurisdictional fields reserved to the provinces.

Then, Ottawa has appropriated the lion's share of the federation's financial resources. The result has been a structural imbalance between the available

resources and the responsibilities of provincial governments.

In the past five years, the federal government has brutally and unilaterally cut back its share of the financing of social programs without withdrawing from fields of taxation. Stripped of the necessary means, the provinces are now grappling with budget pressures that will soon be unbearable.

The central government has chosen to push its offensive further. It recently proposed reinvesting in the provinces' social programs on condition that they agree to sign what it calls a Social Union pact.

To access any supplementary federal funding for their social programs, the provinces must agree to abide by pan-Canadian rules. After resisting for a while, nine of the ten provinces have now signed the "Social Union." Quebec categorically refuses to do so, within the spirit and the letter of the Constitution.

It has often been said that one of the virtues of federalism is its flexibility, allowing various communities to coexist within a single political unit.

That is not true of Canadian federalism. That is not the experience of Quebec. Decade after decade, my predecessors have denounced federal intransigence and intrusions. The Canadian federal system is now engaged in a concerted strategy to trivialize Quebec; the consequences of that strategy could be even more serious than those resulting from the unwanted 1982 constitution.

My government and the party I lead have long drawn the obvious conclusions: The people of Quebec must be able to decide by themselves their political and constitutional future. It is clear that this decision will be made within a highly democratic process. For democratic values are part of the heritage we share with our Canadian friends.

I am confident that, when the time comes, the people of Quebec will choose to have a sovereign country. Their journey toward assuming their full responsibilities will not remain unfinished.

I am well aware that the central government is pulling all the stops to discredit this project. Yet it appears to a vast number of Quebeckers as the only alternative to a system that one of my predecessors, although federalist, described as a federalism that forces provinces "to get down to their knees."

The Supreme Court of Canada has itself recognized the legitimacy of the sovereignist option: "The clear repudiation by the Quebec people of the existing constitutional order would confer legitimacy on demands for secession, and place an obligation on the other provinces and the federal government to acknowledge and respect that expression of democratic will by entering into negotiations and conducting them in accordance with the underlying constitutional principles

already discussed."

As well as legitimate, our option is modern. In 1992, the Secretary General of the United Nations, while discussing globalization and modernity, stated: "To enter into a relationship with the Other, one must first of all be oneself. That is why a healthy globalization of modern life presupposes sound identities. For globalization that is excessive or poorly understood could also crush cultures, meld them into a uniform culture from which the world has nothing to gain. [.....] An orderly world is a world made up of independent nations, open to one another and respectful of their similarities and differences. That is what I have called the fertile logic of nationalities and of universality."

As you see, the debate which the Quebec experience of federalism has given rise to is alive and well here. Other nations are living this kind of experience. I would therefore wish that, in your discussions, you pay attention not only to the successes of federalism, which are indisputable, but also to its failures, which are no less undeniable. No doubt could we all draw profitable lessons.

Thank you.

Forum of Federations / Forum des fédérations
forum@forumfed.org
