

**International Conference on Federalism
Mont-Tremblant, October 1999**

Session 1) Opening Plenary

**The Right Honourable Jean Chrétien
Prime Minister of Canada**

Thank you Mr. Voscherau. Let me add my very own warm welcome to the delegates from around the world. We are delighted to have you here.

Over the next three days you will share a unique experience. For the first time, politicians, civil servants, academics -- all practitioners or experts of federalism -- are coming together from around the world to compare experiences and to learn from one another about federalism.

Sometimes some of us think that we must be the only federation in the world. That no one else shares our problems, that no one else shares our successes. But that is simply not true. That is why today's conference is so important.

It is particularly appropriate that this first international conference on federalism should be held in North America. The three countries of this continent are federations. And it was here in North America, over two hundred years ago, that federalism was invented. The founding fathers of the new United States of America began this new experiment, after the failure of their earlier experience with a much looser confederal regime.

The Swiss Federation came into being later in Europe. And Canada was next. In 1867, we became the third federation in the world.

Mexico is North America's third federation. Mexican federalism is a good deal younger than that in the United States and Canada. In the last few years, it has been exciting to watch how the democratic development of Mexico has gone hand in hand with the development of its federal character.

The three federations in North America are now joined by twenty other federations around the world. Over two billion people live in some sort of federal country. The large majority of people in democracies around the world live in some form of federal system.

The reason is clear. Most of our countries are too complex, too spread out geographically, or too populous to be successful as unitary states. But equally, our countries have too much shared history, too many common links, too great

an investment in one another, to imagine splintering and falling apart.

Federalism fits the reality of the world. A world where 187 countries are at the United Nations. A world with over six hundred living language groups and almost seven thousand ethnic groups. Just imagine what the planet would look like if all these groups tried to create their own countries.

The essence of federalism is balance. A balance between different identities. A balance between local interests and larger interests. Federalism helps democracy flourish in complex societies. It does not just recognize and accommodate diversity; it sees diversity as something to celebrate and cherish. Federal countries often find unity in their very diversity.

In federal countries, citizens can identify themselves in more than one way. For example, I am a proud Quebecer and a proud Canadian -- and there is no contradiction between the two.

In true federations, citizens directly elect both their central and state or provincial governments. This makes both orders of government directly responsible to the population. As it should be in a democracy. It fits the reality of how people identify or define themselves as belonging directly to more than one community.

Federalism is tremendously flexible and can be adapted to very different needs. Federations can be quite centralized or de-centralized. They can have parliamentary or congressional systems. They can have formal or informal institutions for inter-governmental relations. Their citizens may have one, two or many languages.

While federations all have written constitutions, they are remarkably dynamic. In fact, the most important changes are usually non-constitutional -- the result of step-by-step, pragmatic initiatives and accommodations.

The advantages of federalism are not just theoretical. We will be, over the next few days, examining the experience of federalism. But just look around this room. The world's oldest written constitutions are in federations. The world largest democracies are federations. Several of the world's most prosperous countries are federations. Of the G-7 countries, three are federations -- the United States, Germany and Canada.

I would like to give you my sense of what federalism has meant for my country, for Canadians.

We began one hundred and thirty-two years ago as a colony of Great Britain -- a small population spread out across a vast, by and large, unpopulated territory spanning an entire continent. A population made up then primarily of English and

French settlers. Of Catholics and Protestants. Of Aboriginal First Nations. We were a small agrarian society. Today, one hundred and thirty-two years later, Canada is one of the leading industrialized countries in the world. For the last six years, the United Nations has declared Canada the best country in the world in which to live.

We have established a distinct Canadian way. A Canadian model. A multi-cultural society populated by people from almost every country in the world. Accommodation of cultures. Recognition of diversity. An advanced pluralist democracy. A partnership between citizens and State. A balance that promotes individual freedom and economic prosperity while, at the same time, sharing risks and benefits.

Clearly, federalism has provided Canadians with an effective system of government. Canada's federal regime was designed long before the invention of modern government. But after one hundred and thirty-two years, the basic system has shown its flexibility and adaptability and it remains in very good health.

It has evolved a good deal. The pendulum has swung between the federal government and the provincial government. Sometimes towards greater centralization, sometimes towards greater de-centralization. Indeed, today we have one of the world's most de-centralized federations. But despite the de-centralized character of the country, we are able to provide a high level of services to Canadians in all provinces.

Canadian federalism is based on sharing and solidarity. Both levels of governments, working together, have put in place national regimes for public health and pensions. We have constitutionalized the principle of equalization payments so that Canadians in poorer provinces can receive a comparable level of services as their fellow citizens in richer provinces. As well, the federal government makes large transfers to the provinces for health, social assistance and post-secondary education.

The idea of partnership is central to our approach. The problems of modern government do not fall into the neat boxes of constitutional jurisdiction. While we must respect each other's jurisdictions and powers, we need to work together. In Canada, we work very well together despite what you may sometimes read, or even hear.

Over time, our federal experience has helped shape the Canadian personality. It has imbued us with important values -- our instinctive tolerance, our search for understanding and accommodation, our appreciation of diversity, our sense of solidarity, our commitment to dialogue.

Minority rights are an essential part of Canadian federalism. When Canada was

founded, provisions were made to protect language rights in federal and Quebec institutions and certain rights of confessional schools in some provinces. These original provisions were too weak to provide full protection to our minorities. A good part of our history has turned on strengthening these provisions. With the great milestones being the federal Official Languages Act in 1968, and the adoption of the Constitutional Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982.

Today, Canada has a flourishing French-speaking population of over six million in the Province of Quebec, and one million in the other provinces. Quebec is unique, being the only society in North America with a French-speaking majority. Canada's federal system has provided a framework in which Quebecers have been able to preserve and develop their unique character, while enjoying the solidarity and strength of their ties with other Canadians. Today, Quebec is a vital, modern and overwhelmingly French-speaking society. But Quebecers also play their full role in national political life -- whether in elected office, the public service or the courts.

Our federal system has also helped protect our important official French language minorities outside Quebec. The recent summit of leaders of La Francophonie in Moncton, New Brunswick, put the spotlight on these important French-speaking communities in Canada.

Indeed, I was very pleased at that summit to hear President Jacques Chirac of France describe Canada as "This Canada which seeks and invents the rules of peaceful and tolerant co-existence. This Canada, land of First Nations, Francophones and Anglophones, which today stands as an example of linguistic and cultural diversity, as an object of value and everyday life."

Now, it is my special pleasure to introduce a close personal friend of mine, and of Canada's, a great leader of his country, Ernesto Zedillo, The President of the Federal Republic of Mexico.

President Zedillo exemplifies the modernization and the democratization of the new Mexico. He has steered his country with wisdom and vision through often difficult years and will leave a tremendous legacy of accomplishment. He has come to speak to us this morning of how he sees the development of democracy and federalism in Mexico.

I call on President Zedillo.