

Message to the Nation by Jacques Parizeau, the Prime Minister of Québec, upon the issuing of the referendum briefs, Québec, October 1, 1995.

[Translation]

Ladies and gentleman of Québec:

Today, I signed the Order-in-council setting the date for the referendum. Next October 30th, each and every one of us will be called upon to perform one of the most important acts of our lives. It will mean saying who we want to be in our own eyes, in those of our children, and in those watching us from abroad.

A people's choice for sovereignty always represents a decisive moment. The decision to fully assume one's destiny. The decision for us to make our laws and adapt them to our values and our needs without requesting permission from others. The decision to collect our own taxes and spend them on our own priorities. The decision above all to no longer be a minority in our English-speaking neighbors' country, but a majority in our own country. The affirmation once and for all of our language and culture, that of a French-speaking people of the Americas. Basically, to finally be ourselves, simply ourselves.

As this century draws to a close, there is something absurd in our neighbor's refusal to recognize our existence as a people. In their refusal to treat us differently than as one province among others. In their refusal to even accept writing that we form a distinct society into their constitution. It is lamentable that the Prime Minister of Canada makes fun of us, as he did two weeks ago, when explaining that being distinct means speaking English with an accent.

Actually, two futures are at stake on October 30th: our collective future as a people and our future as individuals: the quality of our lives and that of our families.

Our lives will be deeply affected over the coming years owing to federal indebtedness. The head of the NO Option, Mr. Daniel Johnson explained this quite clearly: the federal debt was created in \$30 billion-per-year batches, essentially because in Ottawa people such as Jean Chrétien meddled in our business by over-extending credit and spending money that no one has.

Today, enough is enough. While Mr. Chrétien says in Ottawa: cuts must be made. This is inevitable and it's true but where to cut? We are faced with hard choices.

If we vote for the NO Option, we will be forcing on ourselves choices made by others. If we vote for the YES Option, we will also have to make a collective effort, that's obvious. But we will be able to plough our efforts into our own choices and priorities in answer to our own needs and values.

Jean Chrétien and the NO Option have indicated these past days what they have chosen: if the people vote NO, they will force their choice to cut the pensions of new retirees—so when will they thereafter cut the pensions of current retirees? They have chosen to reduce or eliminate employment insurance benefits for many citizens, especially women and young people. They have chosen to impose on Québec some of the heaviest budgetary cuts in our history. On the one hand, they're cutting into the financing of the health-care system, day care centers and higher learning, yet on the other, they are using our taxes to construct luxurious mega-projects such as Hibernia in Nova Scotia and a billion dollar bridge to Prince Edward Island.

Those are their choices. Choices where we Quebecers have nothing to say. This is decided in Ottawa, where we are increasingly a minority.

If on the other hand we vote YES, it then becomes possible for us to choose how our decisions will be managed. How

we will share our collective effort. If the YES wins, we will have already made our choice: we have chosen to protect current and future retirement pensions at their current level. This is our choice. We have chosen to protect young people's access to Cegep and university. This is our choice. We also have chosen not to confiscate the benefits to which young people and women are entitled. We also have chosen to insure the continuity of programs for children, to simplify and improve family policy.

To make our choices, where will we find the money? First of all, if the YES carries the day, we will recover the \$28 billion we send each year in tax money to Canada. We will also save nearly \$3 billion currently wasted because of duplicate services at two levels of government. We will finally have the power to decide on our investments in research and development. Québec has never had its fair share of these expenditures, which create employment.

But that will probably not be enough. Other choices will have to be made. Will we decide to reduce fiscal favors made to corporate billionaires? Or decide on a taxation reform so that everyone pays his or her fair share? Possibly decide on insuring that taxes on profits of large corporations will not disappear into mysterious tax shelters? Maybe decide to enable each citizen, each business and the state to save hundreds of millions of dollars and millions of lost hours because in one fell swoop we will eliminate one-half of the red tape—since we will only have to fill out one income tax report?

If on October 30th the answer is YES, then all of this becomes possible.

But will interest rates go up? After a YES vote, will it cost more to buy a house or an automobile? Those for the NO Option are trying to make us swallow this one. I only have two very simple comments to make on this issue.

Two weeks ago, someone who specializes in these questions explained it clearly. The President of the Bank of Montreal's Mortgage Loan Corporation, Mr. Tom Alton, explained that there is no reason to believe that interest rates would rise after a YES vote. No reason whatsoever. Immediately the Bank's senior management issued a gag order forbidding him from repeating this statement up to referendum time. Why hide it?

As for the economic impact of a YES vote, as former Minister of Finance I agree with the evaluation made by former banker Michel Bélanger when he was chairman of the Bélanger-Campeau Commission. He said: "There will be some small bumps in the road, but nothing that would be especially different from other small bumps that occur in other administrations."

Why is this? Because Québec is the world's 16th richest economy. Our resources, savings and investments, plus our highly educated work force, business executives and companies are solidly entrenched. Nothing will change this.

Furthermore, with a YES vote, we believe that new energy will be unleashed, triggering a second Quiet Revolution.

For instance after a YES vote, it will be possible to take emergency steps to implement a national strategy for job creation. As a province, we do not have the right tools for doing this. But once a YES vote is made, we can then rely on our incredible capacity for joining forces: our business executives, labour forces, cooperatives, our cities and regions. It also then becomes possible to organize a genuine decentralization of powers and resources for employment purposes.

Many countries similar to ours in population size, yet whose economies are not as rich as ours, succeed in bringing unemployment down within a few years

thanks to concerted efforts. If they can do it, why not us? If we vote YES, we'll be off to a start.

Another example: the situation of the French language is excellent in nearly all regions of Québec. But this is not the case in Montréal. Within 25 years, most Montrealers will no longer be French speakers. As a province, Québec has exhausted all the means at its disposal.

If the NO vote carries the day, we are resigned to watch—powerless—as the French language declines in our metropolis. If the YES vote passes, then it becomes possible for us to fully control our immigration policy. If it's a YES vote, our future immigrants will know that they are arriving in a country distinct owing to its French language and culture. This will make for a total difference in their attitude and ours.

It is a known fact that Québec was built and enriched by people from many different parts of the world. This is good and we want it to continue, while ensuring the security of our language.

The issue of language leads me to discuss with you a second critical factor in the October 30th vote. We have just seen how the YES vote may improve our lives, jobs, financial situations, language, plus how it may protect the social quality of life we have acquired, while triggering a second quiet Revolution.

But there is more to this. In essence we must decide if we will tell our neighbors and the world at large that we exist. If we vote NO on October 30th, the message we're sending to them is: you are correct in denying our existence, you are right in rejecting our claims. Because if we vote NO, we undermine our entire power of negotiation. The ability to stand our ground.

This is sad to say, but if we vote NO, we're putting our future into the hands of people who have devoted their careers to

making Québec regress. In 1980 after the NO vote, Jean Chrétien made Québec take another step backwards. Back then, this came as a surprise to many people, including Mr. Johnson. This time there is a difference, we are forewarned.

From another corner, the Premier of Ontario has said that he intends not only to recognize Québec, but also to consider us on an equal footing with the United States. It has been a long time since we have heard flattering words such as these from English Canada. Just imagine dealing with Québec on an equal footing, with the same respect as shown to the United States of America. Why did he say this? Because in Ontario, hundreds of thousands of jobs depend on us Quebecers. We are one of their best customers. We have—as grocers like to say—immense “purchasing power.” And as you are well aware, in the expression “purchasing power,” the key word is “power.”

What must be done to obtain this respect? Vote YES. Become sovereign. Then, all this becomes possible.

Important clients we are and no less major vendors. I have said this for at least the past 10 years: A Sovereign Québec will continue to do business as usual with its neighbors. It is up to us to keep the Canadian dollar. We do not have to ask for permission. Under new international trade agreements, we are protected from the possible bad temper of our neighbors. North American Free Trade—as Jean Chrétien has said—is an “irresistible” force. Quebecers, who are the most enthusiastic promoters—will always be a part of it. No one challenges this.

It was in fact interesting to hear the federal Minister of Finance acknowledge this week, “That obviously, Canada would sit down with Québec” as a sovereign entity for negotiations. It was interesting to hear Minister Robillard say that obviously,

Canada would sign a trade agreement with Québec. We all agree, this is inevitable, not to be ignored and is quite sufficient for preserving our access to the Canadian economic space.

But as tenants of the YES vote seeking change, we will go even further. For the past year, Quebecers have expressed their desire to keep, if possible, a special relationship with Canada. They want the Québec of tomorrow to be one with an open hand and be a good neighbor. Last June 12th, Lucien Bouchard, Mario Dumont and myself expressed this will of the men and women of Québec in an agreement that we signed.

Following a YES vote, the National Assembly would be mandated to set Québec sovereignty into motion. But before doing so, and this is our commitment: Québec will pause to make a formal offer to Canada. An offer of economic and political partnership that will go beyond simply maintaining a common economic space. An offer that will say: Let's stop bickering over issues that divide us and start working together on subjects that unite us.

This means that following a YES vote, we will take whatever time to orderly negotiate in a flexible and open manner, while representing the interests of all Quebecers.

The text on the offer of partnership has been sent to each household in Québec by us. In this small brochure, you will find a clear and accurate explanation of what

will happen following the YES vote. Please read it, discuss it, and should you have any questions, call the YES Committee in your locality.

The decision you will make within the secrecy of the voting booth on October 30th will belong to you alone. Each and every one of you have a duty to yourselves, to those who have preceded us and those who have defended and built Québec, a duty especially to the young people of Québec.

In 1980 with René Lévesque, we had a first opportunity to make this choice. Over the past 15 years many things have happened. The stakes are much clearer and a second chance is now upon us. Not everyone gets a second chance.

No one can foresee the future, it is possible, however, that October 30th will be our last gathering as a group. Afterwards, as a province melted in with the others, we will perhaps become individuals like everyone else. And in the end, it is possible the history will condone Jean Chrétien's comment that our only difference will be to speak English with an accent.

So you see, in five, ten or twenty years, we will be able to tell our children and our grandchildren "On October 30, 1995, when decision-making time arrived, I was there. I carefully thought out and took the right decision for our future."

Source: Government of Québec, Prime Minister's staff. Notes for the presentation.