

Statement by Lucien Bouchard, Prime Minister of Québec, following the Meeting of the First Ministers in Calgary, Québec, September 16, 1997.

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[Translation]

Nearly two years ago, on October 30, 1995, more than nine Quebecers out of ten left their homes to participate in the greatest democratic exercise we have ever known, i.e. a referendum on Québec's future. Nearly one Quebecer out of two was sufficiently confident in the ability of our people, sufficiently discontented with Québec's place in Canada, and sufficiently opposed to the Canadian status quo, to vote in favour of Québec's sovereignty, accompanied by an offer of partnership.

Among those who voted No, many individuals also rejected the status quo and voted for the changes promised by federalist leaders. These No voters believed the declarations of love of hundreds of thousands of Canadians and their premiers.

Sovereignist voters and numerous federalists shared a strong desire for change. The common denominator can be summarized succinctly: all of these Quebecers wanted to exercise greater control over their affairs, i.e. to obtain more powers for Québec, and they hoped to obtain recognition of their status as a people.

Most of the No voters wanted *more* powers for Québec and recognition by Canada, while Yes voters wanted *all* powers and international recognition.

The day after the referendum, newspapers the world over noted that Canada had received a sharp warning and that it must quickly instigate major changes in order to satisfy Quebecers. Failure to do so, it was said in the world's capitals, would mean that Quebecers would ultimately opt for sovereignty.

Nearly two years later, no tangible change has occurred. Last Sunday, Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanov, a veteran of these discussions, readily acknowledged the situation when he stated that Canada had nothing new to offer those Quebecers proposing sovereignty. "We have nothing," he said.

The English-Canadian premiers spent 11 hours together. They consulted the leaders of the opposition in their respective provinces and federal politicians. Each of the English-speaking premiers assembled in Calgary last Sunday was aware of the obstinate opposition of his voters to any proposal that would give Québec additional powers or special status. Each of the English-Canadian premiers knew that he would be going out on a limb if he proposed the recognition of the Québec people, that he would immediately lose the confidence of his voters.

Painfully, together, they produced a document that is the only possible response by Canada to the 1995 referendum vote. I do not doubt that my colleagues from Canada did their utmost to act and made the maximum possible use of their leeway. Consequently, the Calgary declaration represents the absolute maximum that Canada can offer Quebecers.

Now that Québec voters know what Canada is prepared to offer in response to the referendum vote, we must ask ourselves two questions.

First, does the offer contain more powers for Québec? Would Quebecers, to repeat the most popular slogan of our history, be "masters in [their] own house" to an even greater extent?

Absolutely not. To the contrary, were this offer to be implemented, we would be "masters in our own house" to a lesser extent that we are now. For the first time in a document of this kind, the premiers are inviting the federal government to

encroach on what remains of our autonomy and to take charge of our social programs. For nearly 40 years, Jean Lesage, Daniel Johnson, Sr., Robert Bourassa, René Lévesque and Jacques Parizeau have demanded that the federal government allow us to manage our social programs according to our own priorities and in our own way, as stipulated in the 1867 Constitution, the original pact between the two founding peoples.

Since Sunday, the premiers of the English-speaking provinces have been proposing exactly the opposite.

That is all, with respect to Québec's powers. There is nothing else, only a major retreat. The Allaire Report, the program of the Québec Liberal Party, demanded 22 exclusive powers for Québec. Canada is offering nothing. Worse still, it is proposing to curtail Québec's power over family and health policy and everything that reflects Québec's social solidarity.

Former Québec Premier Robert Bourassa described the Meech Lake Accord as the most limited conditions that Québec had ever accepted, although the agreement did give Québec authority over immigration and the power to make appointments to the Supreme Court, among other things. Other powers were to be added subsequently during a second round of negotiations. Today, in the Calgary declaration, there is nothing.

In the Charlottetown Accord in 1992, the federalists at least pretended to grant Québec various powers. What Quebecers rejected as being too little, Canada still regards as being too much. Today, Canada is suggesting that we relinquish some of our remaining powers.

Now for the second question that arises. Does the document recognize the existence of the Québec people?

In my view, here we touch upon one of the saddest facets of the history of relations between Quebecers and Canadians. When

observers wonder a few years from now why these two peoples were unable to continue to live under the same federal regime, the answer will be, above all, a lack of respect and recognition and the refusal of one of the two peoples to recognize the existence of the other.

Why is it so difficult for our Canadian neighbours to describe us in the same terms as they use to describe the other peoples of the world? The British government has just recognized the "proud historic nation" of Scotland. Quebecers have formally recognized the aboriginal nations living in Québec. We have always recognized the existence of the English-Canadian people.

There is a deep-seated refusal among our neighbours to return the courtesy. This refusal appears to harden with the passing of each year and each decade. The stronger the Québec people becomes, the more dynamic and economically solid, the less inclined our neighbours are to recognize us.

At the outset, Canada was said to have two founding peoples. During the 1960s, Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson retreated somewhat by asserting that Québec made up a nation, although inside the Canadian nation. In the 1970s, this observation was further diluted: Ottawa refused to speak of a people or a nation and Québec's presence was more subtly suggested by the term "duality."

The 1980s saw a further retreat. Gone was the notion of duality, although some English Canadians were still willing to describe Québec as a distinct society. Many Quebecers believed that this minimal recognition, were it accompanied by additional powers for Québec, could result in a compromise. However, nothing came of it.

During the federal election last spring, the Liberals and Conservatives proposed that the expression "distinct society" be revived, although their respective political platforms stipulated that it did not mean

anything. Even this was too much for Canadian voters and Jean Chrétien and Jean Charest neglected to talk about it when campaigning in western Canada.

In recent months, even Daniel Johnson, leader of the Québec Liberal Party, has tossed in the towel on the expression "distinct society." In Ontario, he launched a sort of contest to see who could find other words that would not offend English Canadians.

Saturday, even before the premiers' meeting in Calgary, he accepted what Canada had not yet proposed. He announced, very pleased, that he was going to take all the credit for himself and his party. He gave Canada a remarkable blank cheque. What a sorry sight! Jean Lesage's successor relinquished Québec's character to the lowest bidder. In exchange, he obtained the assistance of politicians from Toronto, Fredericton and St. John's for his next election campaign in Québec.

I believe that this is the first time that a Leader of the Official Opposition in Québec has gone begging in English Canada for support for his party. Mr. Johnson has thus become English Canada's official candidate for the position of Québec Premier. The English-speaking provinces wrote his political platform last Sunday in Calgary. That is his strategy, the path he has chosen. I prefer to define Quebecers' interests in collaboration with Quebecers.

Be that as it may, encouraged by Mr. Johnson, the English-Canadian premiers scoured every dictionary available to find the most banal, empty words to label us. They refuse to recognize us as a people or a nation and are even afraid of the vapid expression "distinct society." The English-Canadian prime ministers have scraped the bottom of the barrel, where they undoubtedly found "unique character," an all-purpose term if ever there was one.

The Canadian premiers are so determined to erase Québec's existence as a nation that they even renamed our parliamentary institution in their document. Quebecers' proudly call it the National Assembly. They have banished the word and talk about our "legislature." It is as though they wanted to abolish our national existence and make it disappear.

However, they do say that the language of the majority, our culture and the *Civil Code* make us unique. So what? What does that mean? What does it change? Nothing at all.

What a discovery! Quebecers are unique. There is a temptation to add: just like everyone else! Quebecers are unique like the Regina Chorus or the rivièrè aux Escoumins, the Skydome or Cape Breton, Labatt Blue or Wayne Gretzky.

It is as though, instead of recognizing the existence of the aboriginal nations in Québec, we had simply described their language and traditions. However, we have recognized the aboriginal peoples as nations, which means that they exist as societies and have rights. It means that we respect them.

This is the difference that Canada pretends not to understand. We do not want a description of Quebecers. Bookstores are full of them and we know what we are. We want to be recognized as a people, since we are capable of assuming our destiny and development.

I note that the Calgary declaration readily speaks of the "aboriginal peoples," but not of the Québec people.

I see that our character is so specific that it is "fundamental for the well-being of Canada." Does this mean that we do not have the right to leave Canada because its well-being depends on us? Does this expression make us socially unique but political eunuchs?

This brings me to another noteworthy facet of the Calgary declaration. You are well aware of the extent to which Québec has opened itself to the world in recent years and broadened its relations with other French-speaking nations and communities and with the United States, Europe, Africa and Asia. On Friday, Québec City will welcome parliamentarians from all countries in North, Central and South America.

Quebecers believe that this is our way of developing. In Calgary, the premiers do not see things the same way. Their declaration acknowledges that our "legislature" (and not our "National Assembly") protects our unique character, but only "in Canada." They have taken great care not to open any door on the world and to avoid acknowledging Québec's right to participate in the great concert of nations. Everything falls into line. According to the premiers, since we are not a nation, how can we claim to speak on our own behalf to other peoples? This clause clearly expresses English Canada's determination to keep us in line, to confine us to the equality of the provinces. It also reflects a desire to describe Québec's difference as outmoded and folkloric, one that is of no consequence for our future.

Québec today is much more than the *Civil Code* and the French language. It is a crossroads between the American and French civilizations, a capital city clearly in tune with the Americas, Montréal, which has the highest proportion of high-technology jobs of any city on the continent, a French-language culture increasingly enriched by its contacts with foreign countries, and an economy that exports more extensively on international markets than it does in Canada.

Every day and in numerous ways, Québec is emerging in the world. The premiers meeting in Calgary want to imprison it in its past.

A close examination of the Calgary declaration reveals that our Canadian neighbours want to diminish us. Canada's ambition is that Québec not be ambitious.

Two years ago, 49.4% of Quebecers voted in favour of sovereignty. This jolt was not sufficient to earn Québec respect and recognition, much less control over its affairs. Two years ago, we mobilized all of our energies to send our neighbours the broadest appeal for change in our history.

Sunday, in Calgary, the English-speaking premiers were clear. Canada will not make any of the changes sought by Quebecers. Ontario Premier Mike Harris was categorical: "We are not offering anything specific."

The premiers have shown, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if Quebecers want to be recognized as the people that they are, if they wish to control their destiny, there is only one course of action open to them, i.e. for a majority of them to vote next time for sovereignty.

While English Canadians discuss among themselves whether the Calgary offer is sufficiently banal for their taste, in Québec we will continue to carry out the tasks that we have collectively assumed, i.e. to create jobs for Quebecers, oversee the health and education networks, enhance the conditions of Québec families, and permanently eliminate the deficit in order to stop running up debt that will be borne by Québec young people.

We will continue to defend Québec democracy and institutions, without departing from our objectives. We are doing so for Québec's well being and to prepare the Québec people for the major challenges that await them. The Québec people will soon be better equipped to face the future and will have an opportunity to recognize itself and finally, calmly become the sovereign master of its destiny and present in the world.

Source: Notes for a briefing.