

Statement by René Lévesque, Prime Minister of Québec, on the referendum question, Québec National Assembly, December 20, 1979.

[Translation]

From the very outset more than 370 years ago, the people of Québec have never had the opportunity to democratically determine their own future. It is therefore with what I believe to be legitimate pride that on behalf of the government, today I submit to my fellow Quebecers a projected question that will enable them to take a decisive step this coming spring. A step founded upon the logical and noble basis of any accession to national maturity, along with realism and awareness of others commanded also by the circumstances that define our place in history.

In essence, what the government is proposing to Quebecers is a means for them to become fully responsible for their community owing to a new agreement based upon the fundamental equality of each partner in order to attain the dual objectives of providing Québec with the exclusive power to make its own laws and use its taxes, plus the right to participate in the community of nations and, at the same time, to maintain the close and mutually advantageous ties of an economic association and monetary union with Canada.

From the very beginning of a political initiative taken twelve years ago that brought several hundred people together, it became obvious to us that the lines of force had already been clearly set by the increasingly divergent evolution of Québec society and the constitutional regime that had by then been a part of its life for over a century. Indeed, at the quickening pace of the then referred to “Quiet Revolution”, Québec tended to assume, or at least

petition for, an increase in its powers in order to progressively take charge of its destiny; while on the opposing side, the federal regime reacted to this growing pressure by hardening its resistance to change, and even accentuating the unending craving of all political institutions for broadening their base of power.

Yet since that time, all the statements and propositions that have followed, intended genuinely or factitiously to solve this contradiction, have only made matters worse. The most recent of these smoke screens, which declared—must we recall—that the time to act was upon us, in turn got lost in the upheavals of the federal campaign last May.

As such, unanimity is now taking shape, if for nothing else than the unacceptability of a status quo that is continuously getting in the way of Québec’s needs for development and even for its security. One only need think of our current inability—which the highest court has just reconfirmed—to provide ourselves, if we so desire, with an environment essentially as French as Ontario is English. One only need imagine the obstacles that a company controlled from abroad can multiply against the exercising of our undisputable rights that we possess over the exploitation of our natural resources, or the omnipresent dangers that our traditional jurisdictions over taxation may be invaded—under the pretext of a crisis—by a central government in need of funds to cover its deficits. Then there is the issue of our continuously diminishing relative weight—and our corresponding influence—within the Canadian context. A sharp contrast with yesteryear when our numbers enabled us to count on more than a third of the federal MPs, yet in twenty years we won’t even have one-fourth of them!

This explains why it is now necessary—without breaking neither the economic

ties and the promise that they hold of a better-balanced partnership—to recover all our political powers before it is too late. Not only has federalism until now refused any satisfactory reform, but also from now on it is quite clear that—as far as we are concerned—that it is just not in its nature to lend itself to such dealings.

Whatever may be the real reasons motivating them—conscious illusionism or true illusions—those who still think of “renewing” this regime exclusively between politicians by first discussing with eventual peers (that others will have replaced in time anyway!) the acceptability of proposals that citizens would then see buried in electoral promises—they are the ones who would prepare us inevitably for the same disappointment.

But should it occur that this new refrain by the same old siren, which has never sung anything other than fear of change, might continue to sabotage the historic opportunity before us, the disappointment could this time be dangerously deep and hard to overcome. And the opportunity may not return anytime soon. For if today we are active or sympathizers, hundreds of thousands having prepared it with continuously renewed tenacity, reinforced with the conviction that each step of the way has only intensified the movement, nowhere in this world can such an effort be maintained indefinitely. All the more so at the point where we now stand, not only is the urgency of making a decision ever more obvious, but our best chance for reaching the objective that is proposed and the means for getting there now seem to be a narrowing path and possibly our only chance to build for ourselves a future rather than have it decided for us.

As for the objective to which we have devoted so much energy, and an endurance that has survived so many tests, it has

remained much the same as in the beginning. What could be more normal and justifiable since the replacement of the federal system by a community framework is advancing exactly in the direction of an evolution evermore commonplace among modern nations. In all areas of the world, we are witnessing the multiplication of associations between sovereign states that pool their efforts economically while keeping the essential parts of their political autonomy. New federations are becoming increasingly rare while States grouping together are emerging everywhere.

So if our project has essentially remained faithful to itself and has increasingly been confirmed by the experience of others, our procedure has, on the contrary, had to evolve and become more specific as time goes by.

What has especially marked this project is the awareness that we could not sidestep this most fundamental rule among all others that whatever may be the necessary stages, no important political change can be brought about democratically if it is not desired, wanted and eventually triggered and accomplished not simply with, but by a majority of citizens. In other words, by the clear and firm expression of the will of the people.

From the outset, we obviously knew this quite well but took some time to recognize it black on white. This recognition—which in 1974 was expressed by an initial outline of the referendum consultation—would by our actions in 1976 become a precise and central commitment of the government that the electors had put into office. This commitment—as well as all others that we have also attempted not to neglect—will be kept by us this coming spring. After having completed the requisite conditions conferring it with all the necessary legitimacy and solemnity.

Since the necessary conditions for an enlightened debate have now been brought together, and despite the unpredictable brain-storming that has occurred in Ottawa, but which will end on February 18th, the time has now come—in compliance with the promise that we made to disclose the projected question that we have prepared—prior to the adjourning of Parliament.

We believe it to be clear and straightforward and have removed any and all ambiguities. Despite all our efforts to be concise—and some may claim the contrary if they so believe the contrary—essentially to make it more straightforward, the most explicitly possible, this meant that we had to add a bit to the formulation. We felt, indeed, that a short but down-to-earth description of the objective would be well worth a few more lines.

This text does not contain anything that would ordinarily cause a surprise, if not only that one finds a clear-cut commitment for what comes after, a commitment whose timeliness—might I add its necessity—has rapidly come to our attention owing to increasing pressure that has been brought to bear of late. We are laying this commitment directly before you today, for never have we had the intent of asking our citizens for a blank cheque.

It is up to the women and men of Québec to decide on their future, and they must be able to approve of each major step in their constitutional itinerary. It must also be clear that even after the government has been given a mandate to negotiate a new agreement with Canada, no change in political status can be made without the Québec people having the opportunity to specifically approve it via the same democratic means of a referendum.

Hence, it is an explicit question, which asks for the mandate to negotiate not just anything, but a specific agreement whose essential elements may be found in the body of the question, as well as the democratic guarantees that I have just mentioned.

As we promised in the beginning, the question may be answered by a YES or a NO. And as set forth in the Referendum Act, it will be printed on the ballots in French and in English (and where applicable, in Amerindian or Inuit languages).

If the National Assembly approves it during the debate scheduled for the resumption of Parliament, then it will read as follows:

“The Government of Québec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations; this agreement would enable Québec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, administer its taxes and establish relations abroad - in other words, sovereignty - and at the same time, to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency; any change in political status resulting from these negotiations will be submitted to the people through a referendum;

On these terms, do you agree to give the government of Québec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Québec and Canada?”

By answering this question with a YES, the citizens of Québec will have the opportunity of taking a decisive step towards taking control of their future. This will be a great step forward as are necessarily all other events that lead to responsibility and freedom.

Source: Québec National Assembly, *Journal des débats*, December 20, 1979, p. 4807-4808.