

**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS
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AT THE EMPIRE CLUB OF TORONTO
MARCH 3, 1997**

"THE MEDIA AND THE UNITY ISSUE"

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be able to speak to you today here, at one of Canada's most prestigious public forums. Your invitation has given me the opportunity to visit Toronto once again and to remark, as I always do, just how much is happening here. I must confess that, as a citizen of Montreal, a city deeply affected by political uncertainty, I am somewhat envious of you.

The fact that I, a French-speaking Quebecker, have been asked to speak about the media and the unity issue, suggests immediately how I am expected to define that issue. It is clear that among all the public debates currently under way, there is only one that is a direct threat to the unity of our country: the debate over Quebec.

Arguments are a fact of life for any self-respecting family. I would not go so far as to say that arguments keep a family together, but they do perhaps make it possible to maintain some balance between family members. In the same way, differences of opinion are the very foundation of the democratic system that we cherish so dearly. In totalitarian countries and dictatorships, dissent does not exist. You pick up a newspaper and all you read is good news. Everything is rosy!

The ancient Greeks, or more specifically, the Athenians, are said to have invented democracy. Like most Mediterranean peoples, they enjoyed open-air public discussions. The citizens of Athens gathered regularly in the public square, or the agora, to debate the problems facing the city-state.

In today's modern democracies, citizens have relinquished much of their right to speak out to politicians, whom we might define as professional, full-time debaters. The lion's share of the action takes place in a small, enclosed agora—parliament—a word derived from the French verb *parler*, to speak.

During the eighteenth century, the news media developed alongside the revolutionary ideas that gave rise to parliamentary democracy. It was the media that gave the ordinary citizen a window on the nation's debates. When you think about it, the media is nothing but a huge virtual agora, where the actors on the political stage—career politicians, lobby groups, the establishment and ordinary citizens—can debate the problems of the country and how to solve them.

According to this theory, it is not the media that create the disputes. The media are only, as we often hear, a reflection of society itself.

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For my part, contrary to what you might expect from a newspaperman, I am prepared to admit that the media are at least a part of the unity problem.

Journalists who report on politics do not reflect the debate from a completely neutral perspective. They single out the most sensational remarks. That's only natural: they can't always just report the same old platitudes. And since they don't always have time to double-check everything, mistakes sometimes slip through. And—let's be honest—they are influenced by their own opinions and interests. Yes, even journalists are human.

In the 1970s, parliamentary reporters in Quebec City came up with a story to illustrate this universal tendency. Had Premier René Lévesque one day miraculously walked across the St. Lawrence, they claimed the headline in *La Presse* would have read: *Lévesque a marché sur les eaux* (Lévesque walks on water) while in *The Gazette*, the headline would have been, *Lévesque can't swim!*

The physical constraints of space or airtime are also very important. In radio and television news reports, where the average story lasts less than a minute, reporters have no choice but to limit themselves to "sound bites," short, punchy statements clipped from the comments of politicians. On television, the picture often adds to the sensationalism.

News directors, editors-in-chief and assignment editors also play a major role, since they decide on the content of the newspaper or the news broadcast. They choose not only what news stories to cover but also the relative importance of each story. They have dozens of decisions to make in a day, and little time to think about them. And they too are not immune to making mistakes.

At a newspaper, there are editorial writers, columnists and commentators who each analyze the same news stories, put them in perspective and try to interpret the meaning behind the vast range of opinions and points of view. For their part, the electronic media use public affairs programs that take the time to explore the same subjects in greater depth.

And that's the real problem. The media put all their efforts and resources into covering the very people who accentuate the divisions between Canadians: the politicians. They invest little energy in reporting on Canadians themselves, beyond the everyday political squabbling.

In general, we are wrong to concentrate our efforts on parliaments instead of on our country and Canadians. At *La Presse*, we have chosen new ways to report on events across Canada by sending our journalists to different parts of the country to write in-depth articles, rather than dispatching full-time reporters to cover parliamentary proceedings in other provinces.

I would now like to look more closely at the responsibility of the media with respect to the debate on the unity issue, both the Quebec media and the media in the other provinces.

Whether here in Toronto or elsewhere in the nation, it is normal to feel aversion towards those who are bent on destroying our country, Canada. This is only natural. But there is no doubt that these feelings have a powerful impact on the tone and content of your media, which are inevitably, pro-Canada. I know of no media in English Canada going out of their way to be fair and equitable to the Péquistes. And that's O.K. It's understandable.

However, the situation is completely different for the mass media in Quebec, where a democratically elected government has made separation its goal and where the voters split 50-50 on whether to stay in Canada or to separate. This situation forces Quebec media to demonstrate a more neutral attitude to the various people in the news and to aim for objectivity as best they can in their coverage.

During the most recent referendum campaign, Quebec media, as a whole, tried to present a balanced view of the two options. It was first and foremost a question of journalistic ethics, as well as respect for a deeply divided population.

According to a study by Denis Monière, a political science professor at the University of Montreal—and a separatist, by the way—the two main French-language television networks in Quebec—Radio-Canada and TVA—provided "remarkably balanced" coverage. Radio-Canada's news reports apparently featured 285 YES supporters and 284 NO supporters. The average length of time devoted to the two sides was identical, differing by only two seconds. This balanced coverage of the referendum was no accident. It was practically an obsession among the media involved.

I must point out that this was exceptional. Things don't normally happen this way. Coverage is never as polarized and media attention is determined by the changing tides of current events and the unpredictable nature of the profession.

The overwhelming majority of Quebec newspapers that run editorials came out in favour of maintaining federal ties during the referendum campaign. Nonetheless, editorialists had to take great care to qualify their position. We at *La Presse* urged our readers to vote NO to separation, but in our minds, this did not mean we were recommending the status quo, far from it.

The very close outcome of this second referendum on Quebec sovereignty was also interpreted by the vast majority of editorialists, both in Quebec and in the other provinces, as a desire for change. A study by CARMA International, an American firm specializing in computer-assisted media analysis, found that over two-thirds of the editorials in 26 dailies across the country had concluded that there was a need for fundamental change. I'm jumping ahead a little here to the second half of my address, but I have the impression that some politicians in Ottawa are among the only ones who didn't get the message.

So, in Quebec, we have media that generally try to provide neutral coverage and ensure objectivity, while the media in the rest of the country share the legitimate fear of their fellow citizens about the nation breaking up. Of course, when I refer to the Quebec media, you have to disregard *Le Devoir*, which has a hard-line sovereigntist stance, and *The Gazette*, which is now totally devoted to the defence of the English-speaking minority in our province.

In both of these newspapers, Canada-bashing and Quebec-bashing are given free rein.

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I remain convinced that the media can again be part of the solution if they are provided with the opportunity to do so.

It seems that some federal politicians are not taking advantage of the opportunity that is being provided by the forthcoming federal election to include, on their campaign agenda, proposals for change that would deal with the single most important threat to the existence of our country. It would be unfortunate if politicians did not seize such an opportunity, particularly when the present government of Quebec has promised another referendum before the year 2000.

I have nothing against the so-called Plan B. It has the merit of getting sovereigntists all worked up by attacking the shaky foundations of their platform and evoking the possibility of partitioning Quebec in the same way that Quebec could be separated from the rest of Canada.

I see a certain usefulness in Plan B, provided we never have to resort to it. For that to happen, we have to keep the sovereignists busy worrying about Plan B while we work hard on Plan A.

In the same way that the federal government has finally gotten around to managing our financial crisis, it now needs to manage the political crisis, and come up with Plan A.

I am the publisher of a newspaper whose news policy is to strive to be neutral and objective, and whose editorial orientation is federalist. This is not always popular in a province where nearly 50% voted YES to separation. At the next federal election, I would like to be able to present our readers with something encouraging about the future of Canada.

A friend of mine who took part in the big unity rally on October 27, 1995, in downtown Montreal, just three days before the referendum, told me about the strange feeling he had as he walked down the middle of the street in the biting wind, elbow to elbow with thousands of other federalists. Fifteen years after the 1980 referendum, he mused, our politicians still haven't managed to settle this problem and here we are again, in 1995, in this dreadful situation where the very existence of our country is at stake. If we win on October 30, 1995, we will have to take matters in hand to make sure there will be no third referendum.

Many others who demonstrated on October 27, 1995, must have had the same feeling, since this huge event spawned a host of small citizens' movements to pick up the slack from politicians who don't know how to deal with the crisis.

I hope I am wrong in thinking that politicians in Ottawa have an easy time avoiding this debate because Canadian opinion leaders outside Quebec have given up. We too often see people in other provinces, including leading intellectuals and think-tanks, throw up their hands and say they're fed up with Quebec's griping, separation is inevitable and, by George, if Quebec separates, Canada can get by without it.

We all know that is not true. Every part of Canada makes it the great country that it is. Be it B.C. the Territories or the Prairies, be it Ontario or the Atlantic Provinces, be it Quebec.

Unfortunately, apart from the occasional group or individual who publicly quits, there are thousands more who sit back, arms crossed, silently waiting for the die to be cast. It's hard to know to what extent this feeling of resignation is shared by English-Canadian opinion leaders. I sincerely hope it's just a passing phase.

I admit that, like many other federalist Quebecers, I feel terribly isolated at this point in the debate, trapped between the sovereignists who continue to spread their propaganda, and their opponents who want to carve up Quebec or simply give up in the face of radicalism. Since the referendum, very few voices have been raised in the Canadian agora to sing the praises of federalism and to promote Canadian unity.

However, being an eternal optimist, I am hopeful that the elite in English Canada will soon return to Plan A. In fact, the only realistic solution to the unity issue lies in a revitalized federalism that eliminates the *raison d'être* of the Parti québécois.

When Alberta premier, Ralph Klein, came to Montreal in February of last year, our Canadian unity specialist at *La Presse*, Gerald Leblanc, accompanied him to an Outremont restaurant where he met with ordinary citizens. Over lunch, one woman told him that "Quebec just wanted to be recognized and protected." Mr. Klein was so impressed by this little statement that he left feeling that he finally understood Quebec.

I sincerely believe that if Canadians are willing to demonstrate a little sensitivity and openmindedness, it is possible to settle this dispute. It has already lasted far too long. I am convinced that most French-speaking Quebeckers do not want to break up Canada, a country they still consider their own.

So, what can we do to avoid the worst-case scenario? According to a report, Professor Charles Taylor, a political scientist with deep roots in Montreal, had this to say at a seminar organized by the Business Council on National Issues: "The political system is at a standstill. Ottawa reacts intermittently, and the provinces are afraid of mistrustful public opinion. Civil society must take up the fight and bring proposals to the political arena."

I share his point of view. I truly believe that citizens, starting with the elite, must now carry the torch of Canadian unity and put pressure on politicians to stop their longwinded discussions and dithering over the question. It is time to take action and create the necessary changes. The real solution to the Quebec-Canada impasse lies in change.

In general, despite their imperfections, the media in Quebec and across the country want to act in a responsible and ethical manner with respect to the unity issue. In the same way that the media are part of the problem today, they can also be part of the solution if they are presented with reconciliation projects. If ordinary citizens and the Canadian elite give the word to launch a movement for change in Canada, then I am convinced that the media will jump on board, because that's our role, to reflect the concerns of the communities we serve.

After nearly 40 years of futile and destructive bickering, it is high time we settled this question. If there were to be a third referendum, it would again be French-speaking Quebec federalists who would make the difference. At this point in time, French-speaking federalists are fed up with the chronic political instability that is so damaging to the economy of Quebec, particularly that of Montreal. I fear that if there are no substantial changes by the next referendum and if they have the distinct impression of having been abandoned, then many French-speaking federalists will be inclined to vote YES, for better or for worse, to settle the matter once and for all.

If that happens, history books of the future will justly assign to Canadians of our generation the title of "quitters" — if not of cowards.

Thank you.